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CAPTAIN VELVET'S BIG STAKE



OR,
THE GOLD GOTHS OF NO
MAN'S GROUND.

A ROMANCE OF SHASTA.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"
"COOL CONRAD," "LUCIFER LYNX,"
"HAWKSPEAR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"RICHARD REDFIRE," ETC.

CHAPTER I.
JOHNNY JUMPUP.

SACRAMENTO the capital of the Golden State was a city of sensations at the time of which we write, a period not very far remote from the present day.

One of the chiefest of these was the report of the discovery of a lost mine in a district characterized as No Man's Ground in the heart of the then almost unknown mountain wilderness of the Shasta country.

Some men laughed at the story, others said openly that they were ready to believe anything about gold, but the average citizen did not take

THE LANTERN'S BULL'S-EYE WAS BROUGHT TO BEAR UPON THE INTERIOR OF THE
FORBIDDEN MYSTERIOUS MINE-CHAMBER OF THE BONANZA KING.

much stock in the report; he had tired of such reports.

"What does Colonel Bluff say?" was a question heard often on the streets and in the corridors of the Sacramento hotels when the alleged discovery was discussed.

Some said that "the colonel" had not expressed an opinion, others were just as positive that he had denounced the whole thing as a fraud, and a third party declared that if the gentleman in question had an opinion, he was very likely to keep it to himself.

It was strange that so many people should speak of Colonel Bluff in connection with the reports from No Man's Ground.

Who was he?

Without further preliminaries, let us see.

In the quietest part of Sacramento stood a house larger and finer than its immediate neighbors. In front it was guarded by trees whose foliage almost hid it from the eyes of passers-by, but for all this everybody seemed to know who lived beyond the wide doors.

Colonel Bluff never walked out, because with him walking was a physical impossibility.

A paralytic affection of the limbs kept one of the best known men in Sacramento if not in California in a peculiar chair which he could wheel about the house.

He looked about fifty years of age. Beneath his gray eagle-like eyes he wore a full grayish beard which was broken a little to the left of his mouth where there was an old scar on which hair would not grow.

Colonel Bluff was handsome. Aside from the wheeled chair, no one would have thought that he was the victim of a physical infirmity, for his disease had left no traces on his face and none were visible in his looks.

It was generally agreed that he had an unlimited amount of wealth at his command, and some people said that he had roughed it more than any other man in the Golden State.

Now and then he was seen on the street, sometimes propelling his chair with his own hands, at other times being pushed by a man who was never seen to speak to him.

On the occasions of his appearance in public, he was sure to be observed and stared at, but people went no further.

Colonel Bluff seemed to inhabit a world peculiarly his own; but, when he did unbend, rumor said, he was the most sociable of men.

It was the first night after the arrival of the reports from No Man's Ground.

The excitement was at its height, and people went out of their way to pass Colonel Bluff's house and to wonder what he thought about the story.

Why should he think anything about it? What did he know about No Man's Ground and its treasure?

Colonel Bluff occupied his chair in a small room on the ground floor of his house. It was ten o'clock at night.

Before him, resting on the arms of the chair, lay a smooth board, and a map almost covered it.

The map had been drawn in ink, and there were lines running hither and thither like the lines of a survey. Colonel Bluff held a pair of compasses in one hand, and leaning over the board, he marked off a circle on the map.

Not satisfied with it, he shook his head and made another that took in more space, then contrariwise he mad a third within the smaller of the other two, but shook his head again and looked puzzled.

"The fools may jabber, but the wise man knows!" suddenly laughed the Sacramentan, leaning back and holding the compass where it had stopped at the completion of the last line. "I know more to-night than all Sacramento, and I hold in my hand the greatest secret a Californian ever carried. The time hasn't come yet. The period of grace has not expired—I don't care what they say about the 'find' in No Man's Ground. It's a wonder somebody doesn't come here to see what I know and to seek that which I guess I'm able to keep. Ha! ha! I know what they're talking about in the hotels and on the streets. I'll bet my last eagle that maps of Shasta Land are in demand just now; but what will it avail them? Nothing!"

Colonel Bluff had barely answered his own question when the door behind him was opened, and he looked around to see who had entered.

"What is it, Nina?" asked the colonel.

A large and fine-looking woman glided to his chair, and, as the Sacramentan looked up, her fingers moved rapidly before his face.

"A man, eh? What is he like, Nina?"

The fingers worked again and a smile stole over Colonel Bluff's face while he listened.

"I guess I'll see him," said he. "Show him in."

The woman withdrew, and the Californian pushed his chair to a table into a drawer of which he thrust the map with his compass works thereon.

Then he turned the chair toward the door and began to wait for the visitor the woman had announced.

He did not have to wait long for Nina's face was seen for a second as she ushered the visitor into the room; then the door shut and two men were face to face.

"Colonel Bluff, eh? ha, ha!" began the man who came in with his hat, a broad-brimmed affair with a snake-skin for a band, already in his hand. "A capital pleasure, this, I assure you. Thought I'd find you engaged, he, he! But here you are, willing to see Johnny Jumpup, who wants to see you, ho, ho!"

The jolly but singular way in which his visitor finished his sentences increased Colonel Bluff's wonder, and before the man paused he had decided that they had never met before.

Johnny Jumpup, as he called himself, was neither tall nor plump.

He was not over five feet, and his frame was devoid of any surplus of flesh. He wore rather fanciful clothes, a rich open jacket, with serpentine silver lace trimmings, rather wide pantaloons with a gold stripe down the outside of each leg, and a velvet-covered belt in which were prominently disposed two silver-mounted revolvers.

The man himself did not look to be over thirty. His only facial adornment was a jetty mustache that covered his mouth and then branched off on either side to end in a waxed point—waxed for the visit perhaps.

"I've introduced myself, colonel," continued Jumpup, taking a chair which seemed to invite him. "Though I come to you a total stranger I presume you don't want to be bothered with references, ha, ha!"

Colonel Bluff shook his head.

"No," answered he, and then the gray eyes looked the little man over again. "Why am I indebted to you for this visit, Mr. Jumpup?"

"Mister Jumpup! by Jove! I'll tell that to the boys, sometime!" exclaimed the caller, breaking into another of his queer laughs. "I'm generally 'Johnny' where I'm known best, and that's nearly everywhere, ho, ho! Sometimes, when I have these duds on, I'm 'Don Johnny,' but, there's no Greaser blood in this mortal frame, colonel, not a drop! Why am I here, eh? It's about the find—the one all Sacramento is talking about, just now. I've got a good deal in thar, if it isn't very large, he, he!" and Johnny Jumpup tapped his forehead significantly.

"Do you mean the reported discovery on No Man's Ground?" asked the colonel, stealing a glance toward the table where he had deposited the map.

"That's it."

"What do you know about it?"

"I? You're the man supposed to know something, ha, ha, ha!"

The Californian's face got a sudden shadow while Johnny's features were touched with a smile.

"Did you come here to question me?" put the colonel, in no good humor.

"Just a little, colonel," was the frank confession. "I want something to do, and I like to serve a man who has money and sense. Just now, about all the wealth I possess in this world I carry on my back, and it's not breaking me down very fast, either. I want to go to No Man's Ground as Colonel Bluff's representative—a sort o' secret emissary, charged with the mission of adding to his wealth by investing him with some good claims in that new El Dorado. I've been through mine suits, mine battles and bonanza grapples. They do say, colonel, that Johnny Jumpup, here the man lowered his voice and leaned toward the man who seemed to have been struck by his cool audacity—"they say that Johnny Jumpup is a man o' men when he serves a good master, and when there's dust in the game he plays."

Bluff had on his tongue a sharp reply and a quick dismissal; but he held both back. Something about this man with the singular name appeared to arrest his attention.

"I go alone if I go," continued Johnny. "I carry no superfluous baggage with me, no wife, he, he! for if there's one man in this world 'heart whole and fancy free,' as they say, I'm that chick."

"Why have you come to me?" put the Sacramentan. "Don't you know there are a dozen men as rich as I am who would like to have claims in No Man's Ground, if there is any truth in the rumors?"

"I know all that. I am here because I want to serve Colonel Bluff, and no one else. Am I the man you want?"

"Do I want a man?"

"You do! Ask me not how I know this, for, by Jove! I won't tell you, ha, ha! Colonel Bluff, you know you need a cool, clear-headed individual, and I know that that person is Johnny Jumpup."

"Not now," said the colonel, firmly.

"When?" and Johnny was on his feet.

"Come here to-morrow."

"At what hour?"

"At ten."

"I'll be here."

Colonel Bluff, of Sacramento, was alone in his room again.

"Has fate sent me that little man?" he exclaimed. "It may be fortune's doings. I'm sure I don't know which. I—"

The door broke his sentence, and as he looked around he felt the hand of Nina on his shoulder. The woman was colorless, her big black eyes

were dilated, and the fingers of her other hand were moving rapidly before his eyes.

"Great heavens!" exclaimed Colonel Bluff. "She says: 'For God's sake don't trust that man!'"

CHAPTER II.

DUN DUFF AND PARD.

WHEN Johnny Jumpup found himself on the outside of the Bluff mansion, he laughed one of his strange laughs, and started rapidly off.

"I did even better than I hoped, he, he! I got inside; not only that, but I got to see the man himself! Will he change his mind before to-morrow, or will he send me to No Man's Ground as his secret emissary? I incline to the opinion that I will get the mission. The portress did not seem to know who she had admitted till I was beyond the door, and then didn't she nearly look me through? Maybe she thought she had seen me before, ho, ho, ho!"

The little man in the slashed jacket kept up his walk till he turned into a second-class hotel.

"Is my pard in?" he asked over the clerk's desk, as he passed by, and having received an affirmative nod, he kept on up-stairs to a room bearing the number 32 on the door.

"Well, I'm back," announced Jumpup, disturbing a figure at the front window—that of a man taller than he and with broader shoulders and a finer face.

"So I see," returned this individual. "You didn't stay long, which fact informs me that you found the guardians of the crippled nabob too much for you."

"Wrong you are, captain!" grinned Johnny, drawing nearer. "There are few who beat me with cords of my own cutting. I have been there!"

A look of pleasure at once lit up the listener's eyes.

"Did you get beyond the door?"

"I did."

"And saw him?"

"And saw him."

"Johnny Jumpup, you are worth your weight in gold!"

"Which would make me worth twenty-six thousand dollars. Not a pauper, by any means, he! he! he!"

The man who had been called "Captain" could hardly wait for Don Johnny to finish his laugh.

"What is he like?" he asked. "Give me a picture of Colonel Baldy Bluff as he looked to you in the lamplight of his own home."

Johnny did so. He drew for his companion a word picture of the man he had just left, and then did the same for Nina, the portress.

He was listened to with rapt attention.

"You have seen the only Colonel Bluff in existence," was the comment, when Johnny got through. "I would say from your description that time has dealt cleverly with him."

"He's a man o' men to his legs."

"Yes; you refer to the disease that has made him a cripple for life."

"That's what I mean, captain. He's got to pass his life in that chair, but, for all that he knows a good deal about what is going on beyond the house, and Colonel Bluff in Sacramento can play some hands that will be felt far away."

"Do you think so, Johnny?" asked the listener smiling.

"Don't they all say so?" was the quick retort.

"Didn't I pick up here and there to-night that the crippled nabob is a man o' power—o' power, mind you, in more than one gold camp hundreds o' miles away?"

"Let him be so. But, how did you succeed? You made known your mission?"

"Of course I did."

"Well, with what result?"

"I have a final audience to-morrow morning at ten."

"He went even that far, eh?"

"Even that far," echoed Johnny.

"You must be on hand to the minute, Johnny," announced the captain.

"I'll be there!"

A moment's silence followed.

"Who let you in?" was the sudden question.

"The woman I have described."

"Oh, yes. I had forgotten. You saw no one else?"

"Not a soul."

"You did not catch a glimpse of the man who wheels himself about in his chair?"

"Not a glimpse."

"Once more, I say that you have done admirably. I could not have done better myself. Don't forget the appointment to-morrow. It must be very sure in its results. I have no further orders for you to-night, Johnny."

Jumpup reappeared soon afterward in the bar-room below, with a long Spanish pipe between his teeth and clouds of smoke about his head.

He strolled to one end of the long counter and resting his elbow upon it seemed to fall into a smoker's reverie. If ever a man showed himself to be at peace with the world that person was Johnny Jumpup in the restful attitude he had assumed.

For ten minutes he blew smoke rings, and, to all outward appearances, built castles in the air, and the shrewdest observer would not have that he was drinking in almost every word of the conversation of two men who stood a little further down the counter.

The wily Johnny never built air castles when he could enact the *role* of eavesdropper, especially when the words he overheard promised to enlighten him in regard to certain things in which he was interested.

"When will you try to see him?" one of the men asked the other.

"To-morrow. I will choose two o'clock in the afternoon for my call."

"He will receive you?"

"Do you doubt it?" and the first man looked at his companion, who was much smaller and laughed. "The prisoner of the chair knows better than to refuse me an audience."

"I would think so. How long will the interview last?"

"Not over an hour."

"That will make the hour three o'clock?"

"Yes."

"Shall I have the horses saddled by that time?"

"Have everything ready—the maps especially. You will step in at Mardon's and get the things purchased there. Go over the list again and see that nothing has been forgotten. The smallest mistake may ruin the whole enterprise. You will also send a letter to our friend in the South. Make the usual promises, but vary them a little. Say that a certain leaven is working, and that before long we will be in a situation to pay off all our debts to the last penny and with compound interest. Our debts! By Jupiter! it makes me grate my teeth when I think of them, but the prospect ahead ought to make one's eyes snap, eh, Julius?"

"I should say so, Dun."

"Are you going my way now? No? Well, I am off. You won't see me again till I come back ready for the opening of the campaign."

"Wait a moment," and Julius caught the sleeve of the man who had drawn back.

"I wish you would use your eyes while you are in the house?"

"Don't I always use them wherever I am?"

"Yes, but I want to know—"

"What is it you want to know?"

"Who lives with the crippled gold-bug?—there! that's what I wanted to say."

"Whom do you think, Julius?"

Unfortunately for Johnny Jumpup he could not see the expression that came to Julius's countenance at this juncture.

"I—I think I could guess, captain," said he.

"I think so, too, ha, ha!" rung out the answer.

"Curse that silk-handed siren!" hissed Julius. "I tell you what I wish you would do."

"For you, Julius?"

"For me."

"To her?"

"To her!"

"Well, what is it?"

"I wish you would choke her to death!"

Dun Duff—we call him for the first time by the name which he is destined to make famous before we are done with him—leaned back and stared at the man who seemed to throw a world of hate into his words.

"I think you mean what you say, Julius?" remarked he with a smile.

"Don't I? If I didn't mean it, I'd have kept my mouth shut. I wish my hand were going where yours is, that is, of course, if she is under Colonel Bluff's roof. But, you won't carry out my wish, Dun?"

"No; it wouldn't be policy, Julius. Besides, I am going there in the daytime and on particular business. You know I don't choke women for other folks, don't you, old fellow?"

"Of course, Dun," growled Julius.

"One of these days—"

"Some other time, pard," interrupted Duff, touching his companion's arm. "Don't forget the maps, and the thing at Mardon's. And be sure to have the horses ready at the right place. It is now or never!"

"It shall all be done, but, by Jove! I wish my hand was at the end o' your sleeve, Dun. Good-night."

The two men separated, one going out and the other, Julius, tarrying to drown his chagrin in a drink which he watched the barkeeper mix with devouring eyes.

Johnny Jumpup enveloped his face in fresh smoke, and smiled to himself while he looked at Julius, as though he were casting about for some vulnerable point of attack.

"He's going to Mardon's now; ten to one on it," ejaculated Johnny, following Julius when he moved off. "I would like to know what are the important things left there. Jehosaphat! who'd have thought that I would pick up such a scheme here! If Captain Velvet could hear of this. But he needn't hear till I choose to tell him." And just then Julius turned into another street and the man in the laced garments quickened his gait and kept him in sight.

Julius kept on until he reached a two-story frame building that stood on one of the by-streets of Sacramento.

Above the door, which had no number, was the simple inscription:

"MARDONI'S."

No other was needed by those in search of the house, and to such the name told as much as though it had been followed by a catalogue of the articles to be found within.

There was a window on each side of the door, and displayed on a cloth-covered board were to be seen revolvers, bowie-knives, compasses, watches, and nearly all the other articles to be picked up any time in a California pawnshop.

Julius walked in without ceremony, and Johnny Jumpup drew near the window, and stole a covert but searching glance beyond the promiscuous merchandise.

He saw Duncan Duff's pard walk to the further end of the shop and lean over the counter.

Mardon, a hatchet-faced Italian, with a shock of black hair and blacker eyes, was listening to what he was saying.

All at once the merchant turned and stooped before an iron safe in one corner. After a little while he opened the door and thrust in his hand.

When he rose he held something like a little box about four inches long in his hands. This he extended to Julius, who took it with a bow, and put it away in his bosom.

Johnny Jumpup saw no money change hands. Perhaps that had been attended to before.

When he looked again, Julius was coming toward him, and he drew back in haste lest he should be seen.

CHAPTER III.

THE SLIPPING OF THE LEASH.

At ten o'clock to the very minute Johnny Jumpup presented himself at Colonel Bluff's door.

It was, of course, the day following the events just narrated.

He did not get to knock, for the portal was opened by Nina before he could do so, and a piece of folded paper was thrust forward.

"What's happened?" mentally exclaimed Johnny, but he took the paper just the same, and opened it, while the woman watched him with her coal-black eyes.

He read as follows:

"Colonel Bluff finds it impossible to see Mr. Jumpup to-day. He is obliged to declare off the business mentioned last night, being too much interested in his affairs in Sacramento to attend to mythical mines in the north."

"Mythical mines in the north—ha, ha!" echoed and laughed Jumpup, when he got to the bottom of the dismissal, and then he caught the look that seemed capable of piercing him through.

"Convey my regrets to the colonel, and say that he could have found no better servant than Johnny Jumpup," and the speaker tipped the hat with the snakeskin band to Nina, and saw her eyes get a new flash under his show of politeness.

Then the door was shut in his face, and he was left on the step with the paper in his hand.

"Cool as a cucumber, by Jove!" cried he, looking at the door that interposed itself between himself and the man he wanted to see. "I wonder what Captain Velvet will say when I report? He evidently thinks that the colonel will keep his engagement. He intended to when he dismissed me last night, but something has occurred to change his mind. I'll bet a hundred that that woman had a hand in it. She's the siren Julius wanted Captain Dun to choke for him—he, he! It would be no easy job for the captain, for she looks like she has the strength of a lioness."

Johnny Jumpup could do nothing more than walk away.

With his back turned toward Colonel Bluff's mansion, he went down the tree-bordered aisle to the street, watched keenly by a man who occupied a wheeled chair at one of the curtained windows.

"He is somebody's servant," muttered this personage, who was Colonel Bluff. "He is not the kind of man who plans deep schemes and plays the game *alone*. No. As an assistant I think he would prove a success." And then the Sacramentoan watched Johnny Jumpup in silence till his figure vanished.

After this he pushed his chair back to the table and unlocked a drawer.

From it he took a small packet of papers to which was fastened the broken blade of a dagger.

The steel was bright and slender, but there was no point, as if at one time it had been violently broken off.

Colonel Bluff looked at the fragment of dagger some time in silence. Twice his face changed color, and once he scowled darkly.

"The darkest history of Gold Land clusters round that bit of steel!" he suddenly exclaimed. "It is tied to a mystery which is as unsolved to day as it was ten years ago when the blade lost its point. They say that murder will out—that crime can't forever hide its trail, but I am beginning to believe that the saying is a grand hoax. If this broken blade could talk it might throw

some light upon the puzzle that has baffled the best sleuths of this continent, but it keeps as silent as the grave. Is it a wonder that I refused to see the man who left the house awhile ago after I read the language of Nina's fingers? I will see no one whose presence calls up the mystery connected with these papers and this broken dagger blade! I want to cut loose from the red puzzle. I want to see no one whose presence can, in the remotest manner, freshen the infernal memories.

"Mine refuses to tell how she knows that Johnny Jumpup would recall that period. I have ceased to press her, and she can keep her secret till she dies. Wanted to become my agent on No Man's Ground, did he? I wonder who put that idea into his head? Who is at the bottom of Johnny Jumpup's coming here? Is it some hound who thinks he can solve the mystery of crime, after it has baffled the best of his kind? No; I won't see Johnny Jumpup, or any one else who talks No Man's Ground or who recalls the past which I wish was buried under a mountain as big as Shasta itself."

Meantime Johnny Jumpup had reported to the man known as Captain Velvet.

"Wouldn't let you in, eh?" laughed the man, and then he put out his hand. "Let me see the paper."

Johnny extended the note received at the door and Captain Velvet read it with a smile at the corners of his mouth.

"Shall I try again?" asked the man in laced clothes.

"To become the colonel's emissary in No Man's Ground? No, Johnny. We won't press that point just now. We leave Sacramento inside of two hours."

"Before they start?"

"What do you mean?"

"I speak of Dun Duff and his pard, Julius—the pard I heard last night in the bar-room. The captain is going to interview Colonel Bluff at two this afternoon, and Julius is to have the horses saddled by three."

Having delivered this information, which seemed to surprise Captain Velvet, whom he had not seen since the night before, Johnny gave a complete account of the side drama in which he had played spy to his own satisfaction, at least.

When he had finished, he was met with the question:

"What did Julius get at Mardon's?"

"Of course I don't know," answered Johnny.

"It was wrapped up, was it?"

"It was."

"No money changed hands?"

"None that I saw."

"And no pawn-ticket?"

"I think not."

"Where did Julius go, after the visit? Of course you followed him?"

"Of course I did," was the echo.

"Well?"

"He went from bank to bank, playing here and looking on there. The rascal kept me up all night."

"Wherever he went he carried the packet, eh?"

"Yes."

"But you finally ran him in?"

"He entered our hotel and went to bed."

"Ha!" ejaculated Captain Velvet. "What is his name on the register?"

"He didn't put any down."

"Like ourselves, Johnny," was the reply, accompanied by a smile. "I countermand my order about starting within two hours. We won't quit Sacramento till after three. You need not go back to Colonel Bluff—"

"What would be the use? I'd find a lioness at the door, and I don't want to tackle the woman Julius wants choked."

Captain Velvet, five minutes later, was walking rather rapidly through Sacramento. He looked neither right nor left, like a man profoundly interested in a mental problem; but when he came to a certain street he turned, and walked up it some distance.

In a little while he was knocking at the door of a modest house.

A small girl opened it, and shut it quickly when he was inside.

Captain Velvet was conducted through a dark and narrow hall by the girl, and at last was ushered into a room nearly as dark.

"It is the gentleman," announced the child, and then the door was shut, and the captain heard a voice calling him forward.

"I thought you would come, Captain Velvet," said a woman's voice, and the man looked down at a woman past middle age and the occupant of an arm-chair. "When do you go?"

"Between three and four," was the reply.

"What! have you postponed your start? You were to start by twelve."

"It is better to start after three, Mona."

The woman sighed.

"I ought not to complain perhaps since you are serving me, and since my affliction keeps me from the trail of justice and vengeance. I sit in darkness while you work in light. Come! let me touch your hand, Captain Velvet. You are my bloodhound, my finder of the lost, my avenger of the past!"

Captain Velvet smiled at the woman's words and allowed her to caress the hand he put down.

"I wish I could go along," she went on. "I would give worlds if I had my eyes as I once had them. I would like to pick up link after link till I found the trail complete—till I stood ready to pay the guilty back. All I have I have given you. You have the dagger point. Somebody must have the broken blade. When you go away it must be to return no more until you have worked out the clew until you, as my sworn bloodhound, have delivered over to me the guilty and the lost if death the inexorable has not come between."

"You have my promise, Mona."

"Which is as good as your oath!" exclaimed the woman. "On No Man's Ground you will find your harvest. It is the abode of cool and desperate men under the control, to a certain extent, of some unknown head. They don't like new-comers; they hate men who have sworn to go to the bottom of crime and to punish the guilty. Captain Velvet, I will try to be patient here. I will wait in my partial blindness for news from my sleuth in No Man's Land. Call Vetla in."

Captain Velvet withdrew his hand and went to the door.

"Vetla, child?" he called once, and the girl who had admitted him came forward.

"Vetla, little one," resumed the woman, taking the girl's hands in hers. "Our sleuth-bound is going to the game. We must wait until he comes back, when you will be the richest little lady in California, and I the proudest woman!"

"Oh, won't we be glad, then?" cried the child, a beautiful little creature not more than ten.

"Yes, the riches will make you happy, and vengeance and restitution will cause my blood to ring through my veins. Long ago a cabin stood on a mountain-side, Vetla—"

Mona stopped suddenly and looked up at Captain Velvet.

"She always stops there," said Vetla, to the detective. "It is always 'Long ago a cabin stood on a mountain-side,' and nothing more."

"Is it a wonder, captain?" cried the woman. "The time must come when I can go beyond that. It will come with your help. Some would tell me that the gates of Justice are locked against certain people. If I am one of those, the lock must be broken. Kiss Vetla, Captain Velvet. You can take with you to No Man's Ground no better safeguard than a child's kiss."

Vetla sprung willingly to Captain Velvet's arms, and as they encircled her she kissed him again and again.

Then his hand was squeezed by the woman in the chair, and disengaging it at last, he walked from the room with a benediction trembling the air behind him.

"Now for the great hunt of my life!" cried he. "Now for a grapple with a crime, the thought of which stirs my blood!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE CODE OF NO MAN'S GROUND.

"GENTLEMEN, if you please, I would like to shave that man when you've hung him!"

A stranger request than this probably had never been heard where it had been spoken, and twenty rough-looking men in their shirt-sleeves glanced at the speaker who looked coolly at the person to whom he referred.

The sun had dropped behind the great cone of Shasta far away to the west, and the capital of No Man's Ground had fallen in shadow.

In the middle of what in the South would have been called a plaza stood more than two-score men, and near by a rope with a noose at one end dangled over the limb of a tree.

Judge Lynch had held his court and passed sentence.

The verdict had been approved by those who had heard it, and it was about to be carried out.

The prisoner was a slim man, with a cadaverous face and a very long beard. He might have been forty, possibly forty-five, though there was no tinge of gray in his hair, and his eyes, as brown as his beard, were full of fire even in the shadow of death.

"What do you want to shave the prisoner for, Burrell?" asked some one in response to the singular request which had just been heard.

"I want what's in it," was the answer.

The prisoner threw a look toward Burrell.

"I don't carry a fortune in my beard, but I have no objection to you having it," said he. "I suppose you want it for the dust you expect to find there."

"That's just it, sir," answered Burrell. "I saw a man hanged once in Placerville, and his beard yielded a solid ounce o' dust. It's a strange request for a man to make, but just now I want a stake, for No Man's Ground has proved barren to Burrell, the rolling stone."

The men of the camp saw the prisoner smile.

"Did you say you want Burrell to have your beard?" asked the judge of the Californian court.

"Give it to him."

"It shall be done. Stand back there, gentlemen!"

The crowd between the prisoner and the swinging noose fell back and the following moment the unfortunate stood under the limb.

"What is your last confession, prisoner?" put a stern voice. "Remember that on No Man's Ground you stand in the presence of the awful Judge."

"Just as if a man in my boots could forget that!" said the prisoner, with a proud curling of the lip. "I think my confession has been ample enough. I don't see why I should attempt to add to it. I took the dust. I have drifted over California, and a great part of the Territories. I have seen life in all its phases, and I had a curiosity to see No Man's Ground. Before God, sirs, I never took anything before. I was not born a thief, but a singular fatality which has followed me all my life has completed its work at last. Why I stole the dust is my secret. What I intended to do with it rests with me and my Maker. I knew the penalty when I put forth my hand to take the accursed thing. Wherever I have been, they hang for theft as for murder. Men of No Man's Ground, when your noose has strangled me it will have silenced a man whose life has been more down than up. Far away, beyond the shadows of Shasta, eyes will grow dim watching for one who will never come home. Perhaps it were best for that one to be buried where the vultures will not find him, than to go back, a thief. Yet, I swear to you, gentlemen, if I could go back to the same circumstances, I would repeat the act. All the powers of earth could not hold me off. I took the dust, and, God pardon me, I would take it again!"

The speech of the condemned strangely affected the bronze crowd. Men looked at one another and then at the prisoner as if they doubted his sanity.

The most of them expected to hear him ask for mercy under the noose, and not one thought he would say that he would repeat the crime if left alone.

It was probable that if some one had spoken in the prisoner's behalf at that juncture he could have escaped the death penalty; but no one seemed ready to take the initiative step.

Burrell was not going to interrupt the proceedings for he was waiting for the victim's beard for what was in it. A suspension of the execution would deprive him of some dust which, as an unlucky miner, he needed very much at that time.

Mark Moline, the prisoner, allowed his lips to close resolutely behind his speech. The silence that followed it appeared to disconcert the pards of No Man's Ground.

"No requests, prisoner?" suddenly asked the judge of the lynchers' court.

"One. Don't let the young lady see me afterward."

As he spoke he glanced over the heads of the crowd and his eyes seemed to rest for a moment on a certain portion of the camp where several cabins stood close together.

The looks of several of the men followed his glance, but they very soon came back to him.

"We promise you, prisoner," responded the judge.

"A thousand thanks."

That was all.

The next minute the noose dropped over the head of the condemned, and a pair of dark yellow hands fixed it under the flowing beard.

At the same time the crowd broke a little and fell back, and three men with masks on were seen holding one end of the rope that lay over the limb.

"The code of No Man's Ground fixes the penalty for thief," proclaimed the judge, also stepping back. "The man before us has been tried and convicted. He has added his confession to the testimony, and the law must take its course. This being the case it is my duty in the presence of the Judge above us to give the signal which blots out the life of Mark Moline, the guilty. Now may God have mercy on the soul we send to His bar of judgment!"

With the utterance of the last word the hand of the California judge executed a signal which twenty men saw at once and in a twinkling the body of Mark Moline left the ground.

There was no struggling, no cry, as the rope suddenly tightened, and the roughly fashioned cap which had been dropped over the prisoner's head at the last moment shut out from view the distorted face.

The last streaks of daylight fell upon this scene, and then, as if that was enough, night came down like an eagle!

Half an hour later a man knelt over an object lying under the tragic limb of the big tree in the square. He was revealed by a candle that burned beside him, and his hands moved back and forth over something that bore a striking resemblance to a human face.

Burrell, the Rolling Stone of No Man's Ground, was shaving the dead!

His razor was none of the best, but he kept at work until the stiffening face before him looked little like the man who had confronted the court of No Man's Ground during the day just passed.

The full brown beard with its particles of gold-dust belonged to Burrell, and when he had

completely separated it from the face he carefully stowed it away in his bosom.

At that moment he heard a footstep and he was looking up into a face which he believed he had never seen before.

"Hello!" exclaimed the mountain barber.

"Hello!" came down the answer. "You've had a quiet customer I should say."

A light laugh accompanied the remark.

"Quiet?" echoed Burrell. "He never winked, and I don't think he would object to a shampoo."

The man who stood beside Burrell stooped and took up the candle.

Then he took a step toward the corpse and held the light close to the face, moving it hither and thither in silence as it suited him best.

"Ho! this man was hanged!" he suddenly exclaimed darting a look at the Rolling Stone of No Man's Ground.

"He was," replied Burrell. "He was legally tried and as legally sent out of the world."

"For what?"

"For theft."

"What did he take?"

"Fifty ounces of dust from Boss Nevada."

"Did you recover it?"

"Every ounce, sir."

"Yet you pulled the man up?"

"The code—the code of No Man's Ground! You overlook it. That's nothing in the code which gives a thief his freedom because the property is recovered. The crime is there just the same as though he got off with the property."

"You reason well. Who was this man?"

"Mark Moline, a rolling stone like Burrell, now of No Man's Ground, which is me."

The man who addressed Burrell transferred his gaze from the dead man to the barber, and looked him over as well as he could by the candle which he still held in his hand.

"You can satisfy yourself that we carried out the code and nothing more by a little inquiry," Burrell added.

"I know what these mountain laws are. I'm not unused to them," and the speaker smiled faintly.

Burrell, in the mean time, had looked the man over from head to foot. He had seen that he was a well-built person, with a keen though frank countenance, and the fact that one of his hands held the bridle of a horse told that he had just reached the capital of No Man's Ground, sometimes called Satan City.

"You must not think that I a stranger can be interested in a man whom I see for the first time just after justice has dealt with him," the unknown remarked, at length. "I haven't been ten minutes in your camp, but you think me inquisitive all the same."

"It's nothing unusual, captain," replied Burrell with a grin. "I s'pect if I were to enter a strange camp and find a strange man shaving a strange corpse all alone, I'd ask a few questions myself. We try to do things by the code on No Man's Ground, but we're human hyer like people elsewhere. You'll find Boss Nevada in the third shanty from yon light if you want any further particulars. I've completed my work and am off. I'm anxious to see what I've found."

"What you've found?"

"Yes. I shaved Mark Moline for his beard. He gave it to me fair and square before they carried out the sentence. A man with a beard in drifting from diggin's to diggin's picks up a good deal o' dust unbeknowns to him."

"I see. Good-night, Burrell."

"Good-night—"

"Duff, Duncan Duff," supplied the stranger, and with another look at each other, the two men parted.

As the person who had stolen upon Burrell walked away, he cast another look upon the white face under the tree and said, with a chuckle:

"This is a queer introduction to No Man's Ground!"

CHAPTER V.

ON DANGEROUS SOIL.

Boss NEVADA was waiting for no one in particular, when he was startled by a rap on his shanty door.

The head man of Satan City, which was the capital of No Man's Ground, was somewhat of a despot in his way. He was not handsome, neither was he very homely.

A crooked scar above his right eye—a mark which he hid under the brim of the soft sombrero-like hat he usually wore, detracted from his good looks.

Physically he was an Ajax in bronze, but when occasion required, and that was not often in Satan City, he could be as soft and persuading as a woman.

Hence Boss Nevada was called "a dangerous man!"

In response to the rap, the occupant of the cabin called out, "Come in," and in a moment was face to face with a man as tall as himself, though not so strongly built.

The light on Boss Nevada's table did not re-

veal the stranger to its owner's satisfaction, so he picked up the lamp and held it in a position more to his liking.

"Captain Nevada, I presume?" observed the man to the scrutinizing boss of Satan City.

"That's me; or Boss Nevada, rather."

The word "Boss" was slightly emphasized.

"You may call me Dun Duff," answered the stranger, who had come straight from the shaving of Mark Moline under the lynchers' tree.

"From the South?" asked the Boss, setting the lamp down.

"From the South, as you've said," replied Dun Duff, who had taken the three-legged stool almost opposite the magnate of No Man's Ground. "Does a fellow have to be from 'Frisco or Sacramento to hail from there?"

"Of course not," laughed Nevada, and while he laughed he took another survey of the stranger.

"I came in just too late to see how you carry out your criminal code on No Man's Ground," continued Duff.

"Ha! have you discovered already that we've just had a little hanging?"

"Yes. I came upon a man shaving the victim on the Square."

"Burrell, the Rolling Stone," was the response. "He wanted the beard for what might be in it—half an ounce o' dust, maybe. Had you ever seen the—the dead gentleman before?"

Duff shook his head.

"I guess he got what he deserved. By George! we couldn't do otherwise. There was the code staring us in the face, and there stood the man convicted by his own confession. It had to be death, sir. He took fifty ounces, and though we got every grain back, the code could not be pushed aside."

"He stole from you, I understand."

"Did Burrell mention that? So he did. The fifty ounces belonged to me, but I wanted to see justice done above anything else. The man died game. He said he would repeat the act if spared and was placed in the same circumstances. Well, it is just as certain that we would repeat our part of the programme. You should have been here and seen the code carried out."

Duncan Duff remarked that he had witnessed more than one similar scene in his time, and that he probably had lost nothing new by missing the one just past.

He was glad to see that there was law and justice on No Man's Ground, and continued by saying that he trusted it would always be so.

Then the two men, met for the first time, fell into a train of reminiscences, which brought out the fact that both had traveled over a large part of the gold regions of the wild West, though they had never heard of each other before their unexpected introduction.

At last Duff hinted at the excitement in Sacramento, caused by late reports from No Man's Ground.

In an instant Boss Nevada's brow darkened.

"Who spread that canard?" he exclaimed.

"I cannot say."

"By Jove! we hang liars as well as thieves here!" was the response; then he leaned toward Dun Duff and continued:

"What do they think of it in Sacramento? Are we to be invaded by an army of adventurers—a lot of gold tramps like some we've got in camp now?"

"There's likely to be an exodus," replied Duff. "But the many will not come. Sacramento waited for the Colonel's opinion, and when it came out to the effect that the story was a hoax the excitement went down in a jiffy."

Nevada smiled.

"The Colonel said that, did he?" he demanded, as though he knew something about the crippled Nabob of Sacramento. "We owe him something for the favor he's done us. A hoax? You shall see for yourself to-morrow."

Dun Duff said that he would be happy to be informed as to the true state of mining in No Man's Ground, and remarked, with a bow, that Nevada's word would be enough even though it was not backed up by evidence.

There was something so suave, so genteel about Duncan Duff that the Boss was in danger of going too far. The stranger did not seem one of the impudent class. He asked no questions that suggested that he was any man's spy or emissary. He appeared to be just what he said he was—a gentleman looking through the Shasta country for a quiet spot to squat on.

"One grows tired of roughing it, Captain Nevada," he remarked, when he came back to himself and his intentions. "One tires of the pleasures of the cities, and doesn't want to always be going from camp to camp for nothing. I'm no nabob, neither do I belong to the family of Lazarus. I'm comfortable and not too high-toned to go down into the mine and dig for new dust."

"How fares the Colonel?" asked Nevada.

"You mean Colonel Bluff?"

"Yes. I guess he is the only man in California who has a right to the title of 'the Colonel'—the *exclusive* right, I mean."

"He still fills his little chair on wheels," observed Duff.

"Of course. He is destined to die there. The colonel is a genius; the Colonel is a power."

"And a cool man besides—a man of iron, one might say."

Nevada inclined his head.

"And so he denounced the reports from here as a hoax, eh?"

"He did," answered Duff. "Colonel Bluff appeared on the streets of Sacramento and quieted the excitement with a few well-chosen words. They listen when he talks down there."

"So I've heard," Nevada remarked; then smiled as he went on:

"I saw the Colonel last, years ago. He was then in his chair, but he had hopes of getting out of it. But, there wasn't the least chance for him. How long have you known the Colonel?"

"Not very long nor very intimately."

"But you have visited him?"

"Yes."

"Lately?"

"The last thing I did before I left Sacramento."

"Ha!" exclaimed the Boss, and he looked his visitor over again scrutinizingly.

He saw one of Duff's hands move toward his bosom and disappear there. A second of suspense followed and when the hand came forth again it held a bit of paper folded and sealed with wax bearing a peculiar stamp.

"Do you know that?" asked Duff, thrusting the paper into the light with the seal uppermost. "I was coming this way and the Colonel thought he would take advantage of it. I guess the paper speaks for itself, Captain Nevada?"

Already the packet was in the Boss's hand and Dun Duff watched him narrowly while his bronzed fingers broke the seal and unfolded the paper.

A message from Colonel Bluff by a stranger was sure to be an event in Boss Nevada's life. He tried to keep back any emotion that would betray his eagerness to the messenger, but Dun Duff was shrewd enough to see that there was a link of some kind uniting the man of Shasta land and the crippled Nabob of Sacramento. The Boss spread the letter out on the table and beneath the lamp.

Duff appeared to look away, at this juncture, as though he did not want to seem interested in the contents of the message, but, though his eyes seemed to wander round the cabin taking in every thing in their way, he saw more of Nevada and his letter than the Boss thought.

From the first, the eyes of the Boss dilated with astonishment, but before the reading was finished they recovered their natural expression.

Without comment Nevada folded the letter and placed it in a pocket behind his belt.

"You don't mind keeping shanty a little while, I suppose?" he asked.

"Not at all."

"Whar's your horse?"

"Outside," and Dun Duff glanced toward the door.

"I'll see that he's put up an' made comfortable. I'll be back presently."

Duff found himself alone. A queer smile came to his lips, and his eyes got a gleam they had not had before.

"Say I'm not the man for an emergency!" he cried, striking the table with his fist. "By Jericho! when they beat Dun Duff they will have no other worlds to conquer. Wait! Of course I'll wait for you, Boss Nevada. If I did come too late to see the code work on No Man's Ground, I'm in time for something ten times as important—to the scheme!"

Meantime Nevada was some distance from his shanty. He proceeded toward the last cabin in Satan City.

As if to satisfy himself on a certain point, he crossed the Square, passing under the boughs of the lynchers' tree.

The corpse of Mark Moline no longer lay on the ground where Burrell had shaved the face.

Perhaps the lynchers had taken the body to the little graveyard, whose few headboards, with badly-spelled inscriptions cut into them, leaned in the moonlight.

Nevada found in the last shanty a man who laughed when he entered.

"We've got him under ground, and Burrell's got the golden beard!" announced this man.

"Which winds up the career of Mark Moline. But, look here, Norgan," and the letter was jerked out and thrown upon the table in the middle of the room.

Norgan, a wiry little man with a smooth face, picked up the paper, and after one look turned to Boss Nevada:

"Who brought this?"

"Never mind. Is it genuine?"

"We'll see, captain."

The next moment the little man opened a secret cupboard in one of the logs, and took therefrom a small vial, which he brought to the table. Then he found a tin basin on a shelf, and poured some water into it.

Having done this he dropped a portion of the contents of the vial into the basin and then plunged the letter in, immersing it completely.

Nevada looked on in silence.

"We'll see, captain," repeated Norgan, taking the letter from its bath and carefully drying it

by the lamp. "Ah! here it is. Look for yourself!"

The chief of No Man's Ground leaned forward with eyes full of fire.

"By Jove! is it true?" he cried, and then he read again these words on the paper—the only ones it now contained:

"This is a viper that must be crushed! I shall hold you accountable for every breath he breathes after you read this!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE EDGE OF THE SHADOW.

THREE times the Boss read the writing before him, twice in silence with his eyes alone, and once aloud through his teeth.

"A wonderful chemical that of yours, Norgan," he cried at last.

"Don't give me the credit, Captain Nevada. You know that I did not discover it, as well as I do, myself. But, who is the viper the Colonel has warned us against?"

"Ah, you cannot know for you haven't seen him," was the response. "Well, at this very moment he is at my shanty waiting for me to come back."

The paper still in Boss Nevada's hand shook before his breath.

It was perfectly dry and showed no signs of the chemical bath beyond the complete blotting out of the words which the Boss of Satan City had read in his own cabin.

The mysterious chemical had obliterated the words in one sympathetic ink, and brought out those in another.

The one message had been written to deceive, the other was intended to stand and to be obeyed.

The words which had disappeared when put together ran something like this:

"SACRAMENTO.

"CAPTAIN NEVADA.

"Satan City, No Man's Ground:—
I send this by one Duncan Duff who I think is a man to be trusted. Everything is solid here. I have allayed the excitement about the new bonanza. I can hold the lines here if you do your part. Detain Captain Duff if you can use him. Of course I would send no dangerous man to No Man's Ground, therefore, I recommend the gentleman who hands you this.

THE COLONEL."

How unlike this was the command which had taken its place on the same sheet!

"This is a viper that must be crushed. I shall hold you accountable for every breath he breathes after you read this!"

Norgan, the expert, looked almost incredulously at Nevada when he announced that at that very moment the "viper" was an occupant of his cabin.

"Of course we're strong enough to carry out the command instantan," remarked the smooth-faced expert looking at the paper. "But, by Jove! I'd like to see something of him, first. I mean, I'd like to know what he expects to do here."

"Nothing that'd suit the Colonel. You could bet your head on that!" exclaimed the Boss.

"Certainly. I wonder if he saw the letter after it was written."

The big Californian laughed.

"The seal looked right though I didn't examine it," said he. "If he is a person who is to be crushed, he is just the kind o' man to play some sort o' legerdemain with a seal like it. It's a long distance twixt Sacramento and Satan City, Norgan, and seals can be counterfeited as easily as you can bring out writing with your powerful fluids."

"Right you are, Boss Nevada," replied Norgan. "But can I see this man in the flesh, and to-night?"

"Yes. He's where I left him as a matter o' course. I am going down to the office. If you will go to my shanty and look in at the window you'll be rewarded for your trouble. Do the act nicely, Norgan. We don't want him to suspect that he's been uncovered till it's too late."

Nevada folded the paper, and not caring to trust it again behind his belt, placed it in a pocket in his bosom and walked toward the door.

"When do we crush the viper?" asked Norgan following him with his look.

"When I raise my hand," came the answer. "We've got the whole thing in our clutches, and the Colonel's power is as absolute on No Man's Ground as it is under the roof that shelters him in Sacramento."

With this the head of Satan City went out and left Norgan alone.

The little man with the bright eyes returned the chemical to the secret recess in the log and threw the contents of the basin on the puncheons.

Then he washed his hands in clean water by way of caution, picked a hat from a peg and went away.

"I wonder if Opal knows that they've planted Mark, the gold-dust thief?" he remarked to himself a few steps from his shanty. "The girl would have given us a little trouble to-day if Boss Nevada hadn't put down his foot beforehand. We kept our promise to the mountain tramp, and kept the body from Opal's sight. She won't talk about him, I hope, when I see her again. It's the only fault I find with her—

she takes up with strangers too readily. And especially with men like Mark Moline."

There were a number of cabins between Norgan's and Nevada's, and one of those was inhabited by the girl whom he called Opal.

As he was near it when he gave utterance to the words just recorded, he turned aside and in a second was standing in front of a door which had a small window for a neighbor on the left.

Beyond the window Norgan caught a glow softly diffused throughout a little cabin by a plain camp lamp, and he was in the act of looking into the building when he was touched on the sleeve.

The chemist of Satan City whirled with an exclamation which he could not keep back, and saw a face and heard a voice at one and the same time.

"Were you stealing a march on me, Norgan?" laughed the person whom he confronted. "Of course you did not intend to disturb me if I were busy, but you did not think I was on the outside—like yourself."

"That's a fact, Opal," answered Norgan, recovering his self-possession in a measure.

"Well, here I am, and I might as well tell you where I have been."

The man said nothing.

"I've been following the man up."

"Which man?"

It was evident that Norgan was thinking of some person not then prominently in the girl's thoughts.

"Which man, indeed, Norgan?" was the response. "Why, the one laid to rest in the cemetery of No Man's Ground."

The chemist caught his breath.

"Pshaw! I should have known that!" he exclaimed, but his doubts expressed before he thought had rendered the girl suspicious.

"The other man you may know more about than I do," responded Opal. "If he has no more friends here than the first one had, God help him!"

Morgan bit his lip, and gave the speaker a glowering look.

"I needn't refer you to the code, Opal. I—"

"Indeed you need not," was the interruption. "The deed is done, and the unfortunate man is dead. He can't be called back to life. If I had that miraculous power, I'd have exercised it before this. Mark Moline was a victim of adverse circumstances—a poor, unlucky miner, goldmad, and perhaps a little crackbrained."

"But he stole."

"Yes," continued Opal, not liking the harshness of Norgan's words. "He took that which he needed above everything else from a man who could lose a thousand times the amount and never miss it."

"You're talking about the Colonel now."

"About the Crossus who sits in his wheeled chair hundreds of miles from here, and whose slaves we are," said the young girl, bitterly.

"But you go too fast, Opal. Those fifty ounces belonged to Boss Nevada individually."

"If they did, the loss of them would not have reduced the Czar of No Man's Ground to poverty."

"Maybe not."

"What is a little gold compared with human life, Norgan? And the life of a man who had a family somewhere."

"Did he say so?"

The girl drew back a little and looked at the chemist.

"You heard his last speech."

"Who told you?"

Opal smiled.

"Burrell, the Rolling Stone," was her answer.

"Oh!" cried Norgan, "the man who wanted his beard?"

"Yes, the man who shaves the dead for a little dust. But you don't like this subject, I see."

"There's nothing in it now, Opal."

The girl said nothing for a moment.

"Very well. The time may come when the occupants of the unknown home will bear of his fate," said she, at length. "The code of No Man's Ground is unalterable. It could not have been stretched a point for the mad miner, I presume. You call it justice, Norgan. Never mind what I think it was. Good-night."

Opal of Satan City laid her hand on the latch of her door and opened it. As she went in she looked over her shoulder at the man whose gaze was fastened on her, but as he did not speak, she closed the portal and disappeared.

"She's a strange one!" said Norgan to himself, as he walked away. "It was her tender heart that made her sympathize with Mark Moline. I wonder if she would extend the same sympathy to the fellow we've got in hand from Sacramento?"

Norgan went straight to Boss Nevada's shanty.

Opal had detained him some time at the door of hers, but despite this he saw the figure of a man in the cabin when he took a survey through the window.

Thrilled by the sight, Norgan approached nearer on tiptoe, and a moment later he was feasting his eyes on the man before him.

Dun Duff had apparently not stirred since Boss Nevada's departure. He occupied a stool at the table, and while Norgan took him in

from head to foot, he took a long cigar from his pocket and began to smoke.

"No child, no weakling," commented the man outside. "If we're going to crush that man—and such are the orders—we've got to do it all at once. He must not have a moment's warning. There's a slumbering devil in that man's make-up. Give him a suspicion, and there'll be red trouble on No Man's Ground."

Norgan had his look out, and by and by he turned away and left Dun Duff to his reflections.

CHAPTER VII.

INVADED AGAIN.

Boss NEVADA came back to his cabin at last with a countenance that told Duncan Duff nothing.

The head man of Satan City could keep a secret as well as his neighbor, and look as closely as he could with the keen, observing eyes he had brought to No Man's Ground, Duff could not discover anything suspicious.

By this time the long cigar had been smoked to a stump, and the night had passed its first half.

For an hour more the men exchanged narratives of adventures, and in the end Nevada allowed his guest to come back to the rumors concerning the great find on No Man's Ground.

"As I have said, you shall see for yourself tomorrow," answered Captain Nevada. "We would like to have you stop with us, for, while we are not bonanza kings here, we are in no danger of starving, and, judging from the letter you brought from Sacramento, I might make it pleasant for you to remain."

Dun Duff replied that he had no particular object in view. He could not say, from what he had seen, how he would like Satan City, but he seemed to create the impression that he would not mind stopping there. As to becoming a citizen—that was quite another matter.

Nevada offered Dun a bed in one corner of his cabin, which was accepted, and before long the two men, each with his secret, were sound asleep with a limited space between them.

Early the next morning the master of the camp stole a glance at his guest and found him fast asleep. The ruddy light which came in at the window, fell across the placid face, and enabled Boss Nevada to study it some time.

At length he slipped his cot without noise, drew on his boots and left the cabin.

Passing down the main street of Satan City, he entered a double cabin, and found a group of men there.

"How is he?" asked three men at once.

"I left 'im sleeping like a child," was the reply.

"With the shudder over him?"

"Yes."

"Well, he's a cool one and no mistake. We've searched the horse."

Boss Nevada's singular eagerness increased.

"Well, what did you find?" he asked.

"Nothing. We looked through the saddle, nearly took it apart, and left things as we found them, with no results at all. But," continued the speaker, "that doesn't prove, cap'n, that he's an innocent cherub. We all got a look at him last night, and our conclusions don't differ much. Thar's only one thing against us."

"What's that? If you know anything, don't keep it back," exclaimed Nevada.

"I'm afraid we have made him suspicious."

"How? He never suspected me last night. He did not quit the shanty last night."

"Ar' you sure o' that, captain?"

The Boss gave the speaker a look of surprise.

"Who says he did?" he exclaimed.

"Ask Modoc, yonder."

Modoc had the eyes of the house instanter.

"What did you see, Modoc?"

"I think I saw the man called Dun Duff outside the shanty," responded the miner.

"You think you did, eh?"

Modoc nodded.

"Might it not have been somebody else?"

"Who else?"

The Boss was compelled to say that he "didn't know," but he was quite certain his guest had not departed from his cabin.

"Gentlemen," said he to the group against the counter of what was the bar of Satan City, "my word for it that Modoc's eyes saw some one else last night. It is true that I was absent from the shanty some time, but Dun Duff of Sacramento was seen off and on by the boys, so frequently that he could not have left the place without being noticed by more than one. Norgan watched him some time, and he was followed by others. No, my man—our man, I should say—kept close last night. If he could have read the command which the chemical brought out, he would have hustled on before this. I would like to know something about the hands he intends playing."

The silence that fell over the crowd was broken by the abrupt entrance of Norgan the chemist and assayer of No Man's Ground.

His keen black eyes singled out Boss Nevada at once.

"Another visitor," announced he.

"The deuce!" ejaculated the mountain Boss, and his brow clouded at once. "Is there a

league against the secrets of No Man's Ground? Where is he?"

"I caught a glimpse of a man on horseback up the trail. There may be more than one for anything I know. But one I saw, and he'll be here presently."

"Two men coming to Satan City so near together means something," averred Nevada, turning to his companions. "It may be the beginning of the influx from the South, but the Colonel wrote that he had allayed the excitement there. This is our ground despite its name—ours to keep and defend from outsiders. The code must be respected to the letter, no matter what the odds and what the consequences. The code, gentlemen. Remember the code!" and with this injunction the Boss walked out.

"What think you now, captain?" asked a voice at his ear, for Norgan was there. "Yonder comes visitor number two, and in your cabin door stands Dun Duff, your special guest."

Boss Nevada had already seen the well-shaped figure of his guest, but he was now looking at the person just entering Satan City from the southwest.

It was a man afoot, but he was leading an iron-gray horse that limped a little as if from an injury.

The man walked with a firm step and as he approached, the Boss saw that he wore common clothes, and was, undoubtedly, a stranger to the region.

By this time the previous occupants of the saloon had seen the man, and all were watching him with curiosity.

Down the street man and horse continued.

"I wonder if he's got a paper for Norgan to work on," asked some one in a whisper.

"Hush!" admonished the captain of the camp. "If he's got anything of the kind we'll know it before we're through with him."

A minute afterward the stranger stood face to face with the representatives of "law and order" of No Man's Ground.

He had steered as straight for the group as possible, and Nevada and his friend saw a pleasant smile sweep across his face as he lifted his wide-brimmed hat and bowed.

There was dust on his boots, mountain dust mingled with mountain dew, and though his horse limped he appeared as fresh as the morning that surrounded him.

"You hit us early, pard," said the Boss, with that suavity of tone and manner which he could carry so well, sleek serpent as he was. "From the looks o' things your horse is a little used up."

"A loose stone in the trail, a slip and a tumble," was the answer.

"No bones cracked, I hope."

"Thank you, none."

"You know where you are, I presume?"

"In Satan City and on No Man's Ground. Am I not right?" and the new-comer threw the lines over the pointed ears of his horse and looked at the double cabin.

"Your moist grocery, I suppose?" he queried, turning to Nevada.

"Shasta Sam's place."

"For myself, gentlemen, I am dry," was the continuance. "Will you join Gideon Goldbar in something that refreshes the inner man?"

An invitation hard to resist; such chances seldom came to the pards of No Man's Ground from the outside world; hence, Gideon Goldbar was soon standing alongside the counter of the double cabin, but not alone.

"Whar from, Captain Goldbar?" asked Nevada, as he put his glass down.

"From the South."

"The South, eh?" and the Boss of No Man's Ground thought again of the man also from "the South" at that moment in his shanty.

"What's the news down there?"

"You'll get it in its entirety in a few hours," was the response.

"How?"

Gideon Goldbar smiled on the eager crowd.

"I'm a little ahead of the hounds," he replied. "They're coming up from the South we've mentioned, and Satan City will find her population increased—probably before night."

Nevada darted a lowering look toward the pards of the camp.

"Is this the influx?" he asked, growlingly, with a return to Gideon Goldbar. "I mean, you understand, is this the result of the rumors of a new bonanza that some liar took to Sacramento?"

"They're not all from there," remarked the stranger. "The expedition gathered force as it rolled north. It's a quiet lot o' men, though—of the kind that make good campers and lively pards."

"How many?"

"I should say fifty."

"With a leader?"

"No. It is every man for himself."

"And Satan for 'em all!" almost hissed Nevada, for the words appeared to come through his teeth. "Do they know that thar's nothing here for a crowd like theirs? By Jove! to convince them, we'll show 'em all over No Man's Ground, and then start 'em on again."

"What if they don't want to go? You know how men of their kind are sometimes."

"Yes. But we have a certain code here—the Code of No Man's Ground. We are as populous here as we want to be. We interfere with no living man beyond our boundaries, and we ask no one to interfere with us within them. Fifty men would fill us to overflowing. They may come, but they must not stay. I say this firmly, Captain Goldbar, with the Code of No Man's Ground to back me."

The two men face to face exchanged looks and Norgan, who was always on the alert, thought he had made a discovery which was to give a speedy and a tragic turn to affairs.

The camp chemist was not mistaken.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLD GOTHS.

"You see, sir, that I am no poor prophet. Look yonder."

The man who called himself Gideon Goldbar spoke thus to Boss Nevada and at the same time he called the Shasta captain's attention to a line of men and horses straggling down over the trail elevated some hundreds of feet above the camp.

No glass was needed to make them out, and the men of No Man's Ground who watched the movement with a great deal of interest and sometimes in silence, felt that they were gazing at an end to their seclusion.

"Those are the gold vultures brought to Satan City by a bonanza falsehood," said Boss Nevada, after watching the scene a few seconds. "It will take them nearly an hour to get here. I wish the mountain would open and swallow every mother's son of them."

Gideon Goldbar smiled faintly, and looked at another man who, standing by himself, was quietly looking at the invasion.

This was Dun Duff.

As yet the stern command revealed on the message from Sacramento by Norgan's chemists had not been carried out.

Boss Nevada was curious to know why Colonel Bluff wanted their visitor crushed like a viper, and he was waiting to see if Dun Duff would not in some manner give him a glimpse of his "hand."

"It can be done any time," the captain of the camp thought to himself. "I have but to lift my hand and off goes his head, but I want to know why the Colonel wants him crushed. Tonight, mebbe, or to-morrow. Time enough, anyhow."

Dun Duff and Gideon Goldbar had not yet met.

There were some in camp who inclined to the belief that the two men were well-known to one another, and that they were keeping apart for selfish purposes. Boss Nevada did not think so.

He prided himself on his judgment of human nature wherever he found it, and he had decided secretly that the men were not friends.

It was still two hours before sunset when the head of the column seen on the mountain appeared at the confines of Satan City.

It was a motley crowd, sure enough. There were men on horseback and men afoot, but all showed traces of travel and not a few were cursing the trip while they entered the capital of No Man's Ground.

A crowd of sullen, unwelcome faces greeted them. A wall of bronzed stalwarts seemed to rise between them and the treasures of the new Golconda.

The caravan halted on the Square, and horses were unsaddled under the very limb from which the corpse of Mark Moline had lately dangled.

Boss Nevada walked toward the company with nearly one-half of the population of Satan City at his heels.

The cold eye of the Shasta Boss looked the men over individually and as a whole. He sized them up and seemed to draw a not very pleasant conclusion.

It was a bad crowd. It was composed largely of old prospectors—men who had roughed it from diggings to diggings and tramped from claim to claim.

"A crowd not to be brow-beaten if it doesn't want to be," summed up Norgan the assayer. "I would like to know which of the two men fetched it up here—Dun Duff or Gideon Goldbar. Don't tell me that such a set o' men came together by chance. Can't I see that they've been picked—picked by some cool head for a purpose? And that purpose, what? The wresting of No Man's Ground from the hands that hold it now."

Boss Nevada mingled with the invaders. In a little while his reserve seemed to pass away and he became chatty as he met different members of the caravan.

Everywhere he heard the same story.

They had been apprised of the finding of a new mine on No Man's Ground. One report had confirmed another until they could not but believe.

They had come mostly from Sacramento, but here and there along the trail other eager ones had joined them, till the band was swelled to its present numbers.

The head of Satan City told the miners that he was sorry they had been dragged so far by

an idle rumor, which contained not one atom of truth.

No Man's Ground was a nice place to inhabit. The climate was good, the air was pure, but as to it having the semblance of a bonanza, poof! he would let them see for themselves.

As a matter of course, Shasta Sam's bar did a good business after the arrival of the gold Goths.

As tongues became loosened under the influence of the mountain liquors, the pards of Satan City, who always kept a certain object in view, picked up some new information here and there.

One of these industrious spies sought out Boss Nevada and found him in what was called "the office," a small chamber hewn out of almost solid rock, and a great many feet from the surface and the light.

"So you have found a man who recognizes Dun Duff?" asked Boss Nevada, when he had listened to the man's report.

"Yes."

"And at first sight he called him by quite another name, eh?"

"He did."

"That is one point," responded Nevada, with a smile. "He is a man of more names than one. We know him to have two, but there's no telling how many more he's got. Was the fellow positive?"

"He seemed to be. When I mentioned that the person he saw was Dun Duff, he wanted to bet five ounces of dust that he could startle him by speaking a certain name behind his back."

"You did not let him do that, Onyx?"

"No. I didn't want to test him without orders."

"Can you find the miner readily?"

"Yes, captain."

"Go and bring him here."

"To 'the office?'" asked the pard, with a look of surprise.

"No; you are right, Onyx—not here. Bring him to Mine Number Three within thirty minutes. There's nothing there for him to see, you know. Do the work silently. This may be important. By Jericho! if the Colonel knew this, the chair wouldn't hold him, crippled as he is."

Onyx departed, to find the man with whom he had conversed among the newly-arrived miners, and Boss Nevada turned to the desk built half-way into the wall.

He opened a door with a small steel key, and took out several bits of paper and a stick of red sealing-wax.

With these in his possession he left the spot, but soon afterward leaned against a huge rock near the entrance to an underground apartment similar to the office.

Presently footsteps and voices were heard, and then Onyx and another man made their appearance.

"This is he, captain," observed Onyx, pointing to his companion.

It was not altogether dark in the place. A lamp fastened to a stone wall gave some light, but Boss Nevada turned it higher, and surveyed the man again.

"Your name?" demanded the Boss of No Man's Ground.

"Nicol Macbeth."

"Where from?"

"From pretty nigh everywhere, captain," with a smile.

"You are cosmopolitan, then?"

"We'll say so."

"What do you know about the man called Dun Duff? The man who brought you to me tells me that you called him by another name."

"I did."

"Then you recognized him?"

"Yes."

"But not as Dun Duff?"

"No."

"Well, I am waiting for you to go on, Macbeth."

The man before Boss Nevada seemed to wonder why this inquisition.

The captain of the camp noticed it.

"We reward men who do us a favor," he hastened to say, presuming on Macbeth's cupidity. "There's nothing here for the many who came into camp to-day; there may be a good deal for the discreet few. You understand me, Macbeth?"

"Perfectly," answered the man.

A moment's silence followed the answer.

"Where did you see, we will say, Dun Duff before to-day?"

"In Arizona, in Colorado, in 'Frisco and—" Boss Nevada threw up his hand.

"That will do. Who is he?"

"Do you want the name by which I would call him, were we on intimate terms, eh?"

"That is exactly what I want."

Nicol Macbeth leaned toward Boss Nevada, and answered in lowered tones:

"I would call him Cactus Claude for one name."

"What for another?"

"The Marked Major."

"Anything else?"

"Not at present," answered Macbeth.

"Why is he here?"

"That's quite another thing," laughed the miner.

"You don't pretend to know?"

"I know nothing."

"Had he anything to do with you men invading No Man's Ground?"

Nicol Macbeth shook his head.

"You came up here for what was to be found, did you?"

"Yes."

"That's all. But stay! one other question."

The miner, who had started off, turned back.

"What is Dun Duff's reputation for coolness?" asked Boss Nevada.

"It is first-class."

"Is he 'on the drop?'"

"He is perfectly at home with the pistol, and, if he hasn't abandoned his once favorite idea, with the dynamite-knife, also."

"What is that?"

"A Bowie with some kind of explosive in the handle. The knife is thrown; the handle, instead of the point, strikes the victim, and the explosion follows."

"Great Caesar! is this the sort of man we've got to deal with?" cried Boss Nevada.

Macbeth said nothing.

"After all you have said, and all you have seen and know, would you say that Dun Duff is here on mischief bent?"

"He never goes anywhere on any other mission."

Once more the Boss of Satan City said "that is all," and this time Nicol Macbeth was permitted to disappear.

"Three names and a dynamite dagger!" parted Boss Nevada's lips as he followed the Gold Goth back toward the Square.

There was a gleam of eagerness and triumph in his eyes.

He crossed the Plaza at one side and entered a cabin a few steps beyond.

It was not his own, as a woman's voice of greeting assured him. He stood face to face with Opal.

"Opal, my girl, I have another request," said he.

"What! are you going to hang another man under the code, and want me to stay in the house?" was the quick retort.

"You are right as to half of it, girl. I want you to keep close to the cabin till morning."

"What are you going to do?"

"Make safe the secret of No Man's Ground!"

CHAPTER IX.

BETWEEN TWO CABINS.

WHETHER he was afraid to trust himself longer in the presence of the beautiful girl called sometimes the Seraph of Satan City, or whether he was eager to carry out his intentions at once, Boss Nevada turned from the cabin without giving Opal a chance to reply.

"How are they going to make the secret safe and who endangers it?" she asked herself, while the sound of Nevada's feet died away. "The camp swarms with wild-looking men who say, I understand that they come here in the capacity of miners; but what has occasioned this simultaneous rush?"

Opal went to the door and looked toward the Square.

The day had vanished and she could no longer single out the different stalwart forms that had attracted her before. Laughter and voices were borne to her ears, and beyond the Plaza she saw the open door of Shasta Sam's saloon.

She was looking and listening in the doorway when a figure came around the cabin.

Opal drew back, but a quick laugh assured her that she had nothing to fear.

"It is the man who came last," passed through her thoughts when she gave the man before her a second look.

"Did I frighten you? You will pardon me," spoke the one at the door with the light from the lamp within on his face. "I have been waiting a little while to see you. You are alone?"

"Yes," answered Opal, though her tones did not contain the grant of an interview.

A second later she stepped back and held the door open.

"If you want to talk with me let us go inside," said she, and in a moment she found her self face to face in her own little abode with Gideon Goldbar.

She had seen the man several times on the street since his arrival in Satan City, but never before had she stood so close to him.

She now remarked that he was handsome, with a fine figure, a well-molded face and an observing black eye.

What did he want to say to her?

"They call you Opal, do they not?" began Gideon.

"Opal," answered the girl with a smile.

"You have been here a long time?"

"A long time," was the quiet echo.

"You know that a portion of the Code of No Man's Ground was carried out here last night?"

Opal could not keep back a start.

"I should not have asked you this, perhaps," smiled the stranger. "You cannot be ignorant of the proceedings under the tree in the Square. What I want to ask is, what do you know about Mark Moline?"

"I might say, nothing."

"He was hanged for theft?"

"Yes."

"He took fifty ounces belonging to Boss Nevada?"

"I believe that was the charge."

"The dust—every grain of it—was recovered."

"It was."

"But the code stood between the man and mercy I believe they say."

Opal's eyes caught an indignant flash.

"They might have stretched the code a little. I think justice would not have complained. But," she added quickly, "you know there must be a semblance of law, if not law itself, even in a place like this."

"That is true, Opal," answered Gideon Goldbar. "We will not discuss Mark Moline's sentence. I am not here for that purpose. You saw the man—had a talk with him—after they brought him back."

"Yes. It was not much of a talk, though."

"No? Now, did he give you any part of his history? Did he say where live the ones of whom he spoke just before he was hanged?"

Opal did not speak for a moment.

"I am talking to a man who comes here a perfect stranger," rejoined she at last. "You must not forget that until to-day we never saw one another. You came to No Man's Ground as Gideon Goldbar, and I know nothing more of you. We are an exclusive community here. It is known far beyond the boundaries of our land that we would rather not be molested. The coming of the Gold Goths, as the men out yonder are already called, may breed trouble though I hope not. You don't come with them—that is true; you don't seem to belong to them. But for all this you are an invader of exclusive territory like the man who preceded you a few hours; like Dun Duff. Now I am asked to divulge what may be a secret. I had an interview with Mark Moline not long before they tried him under the laws of No Man's Ground, and hanged him under the same merciless code. Why should I tell you anything that he told me?"

Gideon Goldbar could not dispute the potency of the girl's argument. What right had he to ask her to confide anything to him?

She belonged to No Man's Ground as exclusively as did Boss Nevada its acknowledged master.

"You may be right," answered Gideon. "I have looked at this matter in the same light in which you view it. I have not come to you to rob you of any secrets which you may not want to surrender willingly. You have been frank with me. I like frank people. I have no connection with the movement which has thrown the Gold Goths into No Man's Ground. I am not allied in any way to the man called Dun Duff. I am here not by accident but by design. I want to know something which you are able to impart—if you will. If the man hung by the men of Satan City intrusted you with a secret which you bound yourself to keep, I fully understand the matter. I hope that is not the situation."

"It is not," returned Opal quickly and with a slight flush. "I came away from Mark Moline with no secrets. The man was in the shadow of death, but that fact did not seem to trouble him."

"So they tell me who attended him through the last ordeal of his life. Mark Moline was a brave man."

Opal was pleased with this eulogy.

"He could not have been anything else. Bravery was a part of his nature," she exclaimed. "They would not let me out of the house during the trial and execution. They feared that I would come into court and plead for his life."

"Can we go back to your talk with him?" ventured Gideon Goldbar.

"We can," was the prompt response.

The man did not reply, but looking into Opal's face waited for her to proceed.

"He had but little to confide to any one," she went on after a brief silence. "Mark Moline was not a man of secrets. He talked about his wife and children and asked me to try to tell them some day that he was dead."

"Did he tell you where they were?"

"No."

"No!" echoed Gideon Goldbar.

"He did not know," answered Opal. "He knew once—it was years ago—but he had been beating about the world so long that he lost track of them. Which is not strange, you know."

"Not at all strange," said Gideon. "Where were they lost?"

"In Sacramento."

"When?"

"In the year 1871."

The man seemed to make a mental note of Opal's reply.

"It was not much of a secret, Mr. Goldbar," smiled the girl. "Strange to say, I have never been asked before what Mark Moline said to me. Boss Nevada who is curious about a good many things does not seem to care, and the rest of them appear equally indifferent. The dead man had no keepsakes. He gave to Burrell the only thing he had to dispose of—his beard, which netted the gold-mad barber nearly an ounce of dust."

Opal stopped like a person who reaches the end of a narrative.

There was nothing more for her to say.

Gideon Goldbar had drawn from her all she knew about the man who suffered death under the Code of No Man's Ground.

"I might ask you some questions now," she suddenly said.

"Go ahead, girl."

But Opal shook her head. "No. Your replies would do me no good, besides you are here on business of your own and I have no right to intrude. I might ask why you want to know so much about the man who was hung—"

"A passing fancy, perhaps, Opal," he laughed. "He is a man who has no friends—a person drifting from camp to camp. He commits a crime against the common law of gold-diggings everywhere. He does it knowing the penalty, and when caught says that he would repeat the offense with death staring him in the face. Isn't all this enough to interest even a stranger in him?"

"It is something singular," Opal rejoined.

"I never saw anything like it. Fifty ounces of dust taken from the kind of a man Boss Nevada seems to be was almost certain to be followed by death. I would sooner rob a bank in San Francisco."

"You are right. The pards of No Man's Ground would have followed Mark Moline to the ends of the world for those fifty ounces. And, what is more, they would have brought him back to suffer the penalty here."

"Is that in the code?"

"It is. All of its violations are punished on No Man's Ground."

Gideon Goldbar did not push his investigations further.

He went to the door, and with one of his hands on the latch looked back at the girl regarding him in the soft light of the lamp.

"You have told me even more than I had hoped to obtain. You have the thanks of Gideon Goldbar," and then lifting the brim of his hat with the tips of his fingers, he went out and Opal was alone.

If she had gone to the door, she might have seen a figure follow her visitor from the cabin.

If she could have caught up with the human ferret and looked into its face, she would have recognized one of the most important tenants of No Man's Ground—Norgan, the chemist and assayer.

If he had overheard the conversation had beneath the cabin roof, Boss Nevada was likely to know something within a short time, and he would know that another man besides Dun Duff needed watching.

"This fellow for myself," muttered Norgan, with a shake of the head. "I don't care what Boss Nevada thinks of Dun Duff, I've got my opinion of Gideon Goldbar."

In a little while he lost the man he followed among the Gold Goths on the Square, and while he was cautiously looking for him, he was touched on the arm.

"We've got another dead man in camp, Norgan," said a voice as he turned.

"No! who is he now?"

"It is one o' the Goths. They don't know it yet. Come with me."

Norgan permitted himself to be led to where two cabins stood close together.

"Here he is, Norgan," continued the chemist's pard.

Norgan bent over a dead man stretched on the ground.

It was too dark at that spot to let him see the features as he wanted to see them.

Diving one hand into his pocket, he produced a match and struck it on one of the logs.

A moment afterward he was holding it close to a face whose chief ornament was an enormous mustache.

"Ho!" cried Norgan. "He ought to have kept his secrets to himself. This is Nicol Macbeth, the Goth whom I took to Boss Nevada awhile ago because he knew something about a certain person."

"Is that true, Norgan?"

"Nothing was ever truer."

"Where is that certain person?"

"In this camp!" and the assayer of No Man's Ground threw down his useless match and bounded to his feet. "Now let's see the Goths with their blood hot. I fancy it'll be a sight!"

CHAPTER X.

DOWN IN THE DARK.

MEANTIME Gideon Goldbar had singled out from among the Gold Goths a man who had walked away with him at the touch of his finger.

No persons with suspicions aroused seemed to see the two together, and the eyes that did see them thus thought nothing particularly of the companionship.

"Well, captain, he beat you a few hours!" exclaimed Gideon Goldbar's comrade when the two stood near the entrance to one of the mines of No Man's Ground.

"A few hours, Johnny?"

"He is still Dun Duff as he was in Sacramento up to the moment of his leaving."

"Yes. What became of Julius, who got the little box over Mardon's counter?"

"I have been waiting to tell you, ha, ha, ha!"

"He left the city with the Goths, did he not?"

"He did."

"But I haven't seen him here."

"By Jove! he isn't here. He met with an accident by the way."

"An accident, Johnny? How's that?"

"The third day out Julius became involved in a quarrel with one o' our party, but we got 'em apart before they came to blows. That night Nicol Macbeth, with whom Julius had fallen out, lost a few things from under his pillow, which was nothing but his blanket. As a matter o' course we arrested Julius and searched him. But we found nothing."

"And let him go?"

"Wait a minute. Just before the searchers got ready to report, a man came forward and said that he saw a man put something under a boulder at the edge of camp shortly before midnight. He wasn't prepared to say who it was, for he didn't know. A committee was sent to the rock and there they found all the missing things. They measured the footprints near the stone and then took the dimensions of Julius's boots. A deucedly fine scheme, eh? he, he, he! That's how Julius came by his accident."

"But what became of him?" questioned Gideon Goldbar, eagerly.

"Better ask the committee that stayed behind with Julius while the rest of us went on," was the answer.

"Did you question them when they came up?"

"No; nobody did. We all saw that Julius wasn't with 'em, and that seemed to be enough."

"Do you think Dun Duff knows anything of this?"

The man addressed—who was none other than our late Sacramento acquaintance, Johnny Jumpup—shook his head in a manner that implied doubt.

"I haven't seen him hunting for his pard. He hasn't been near us Goths since we came, as if he imagined what's happened, ha, ha. If he wants to find Julius, he will have to track us back. But, captain, what do you know?"

"A little," smiled Gideon Goldbar.

"More than you did before you left Sacramento?"

"Yes, Johnny."

"What is the outlook on No Man's Ground?"

"The puzzle is not much clearer."

"How are the mines?"

"We might answer that question in part by an investigation."

Johnny Jumpup looked at the dark cavernous opening in the mountain at his side.

"Shall we go in, captain?" asked he. "Boss Nevada who runs the diggings here says, that we have struck Poverty's Pocket instead of Gold Land. The others say the same. To-morrow we are to be taken about over No Man's Ground like a visiting committee of a legislature. Of course we'll be shown the poor side of the picture. If they have any played-out mines here we'll see 'em thoroughly. The bonanza we won't get to look at. I'll bet my head, and it's the last thing I want to part with, ha, ha, that with us came some one in the employ of the crippled Nabob of Sacramento—Colonel Baldy Bluff. But the shaft! Here it is, captain, ready for inspection."

Ten minutes afterward the two men were enveloped in total darkness.

They were no longer on the surface of No Man's Ground, but many feet below it, and one was ahead of the other, feeling their way down a subterranean corridor with their hands on the wall.

Now and then they exchanged words, but it was not often, and then they spoke nearly altogether in monosyllables.

"Now for the inspection," said the voice of Johnny Jumpup when he and the captain had halted in a small chamber. "Some o' the rocks I've picked up along ar' rayther heavy, but I don't like the way they feel."

Gideon Goldbar took from a little case with an oiled-silk lining a wax candle which he handed to Johnny Jumpup after he had lighted it.

Then he fell to examining a number of roughly shaped nuggets of rock which he had broken from the walls with his hands or picked up from the floor of the mine.

His companion held the candle, and looked on with a good deal of curiosity.

Goldbar went through his treasures, and then took other pieces of rock from Johnny's pockets and gave them the same inspection.

"This is one of the mines you'll see to-morrow," he remarked, giving his friend a smile as their eyes met.

"I thought so just from the feel of the pieces," was the response. "Is there nothing about 'em that indicates the presence of gold in No Man's Ground?"

"Yes, but it isn't here; and besides, the rocks don't throw indications enough to encourage a miner."

"Then we can go back."

"Not just yet. We'll go a little further, and pull up the net again."

The candle was put out, and once more the tread of Gideon Goldbar and Johnny Jumpup was the only noise that broke the silence of the mine.

Some distance from the spot where they had

examined the products of their expedition they repeated the operation.

Gideon shook his head over the result.

"Another water haul—not so much as a fin," laughed Johnny.

"Not a scale," was the response. "We can go back now and try elsewhere."

And out went the candle, and back they went.

"Captain," suddenly whispered Johnny Jumpup, and at the same time he touched his companion's sleeve, "there's something behind us."

In an instant the two men stood like statues in the darkness, and the silence that hemmed them in was something striking.

"I—don't—hear—it—now," said a voice at Gideon Goldbar's ear. "But I did, by the souls o' my dead!"

Five minutes longer stood the two friends, without apparently moving a muscle, much less doing anything to create the slightest sound.

The presence of a spy, a tracker, a sleuth of No Man's Ground in that underground cavern, was not calculated to give rise to pleasant thoughts.

Gideon Goldbar and Johnny Jumpup thought of the same thing at the same time.

"We can't afford to have spies at our heels at this stage of the game," was the sentence that formed itself in their minds. "The man who sits in his wheeled chair in Sacramento and operates on No Man's Ground, has too much at stake not to employ the keenest spies money can buy."

Johnny Jumpup was the first of the twain to try his tongue again.

"Let me tackle it, captain, he whispered. "Go ahead, making noise enough for two. I'll stay behind and take care of it when it comes up."

"You don't know what it is, Johnny."

"Something o' flesh and blood," was the answer and if he had not been standing where he was he would have supplemented his words with his favorite chuckle.

Gideon Goldbar leaned back to his companion and said:

"Be careful. I am not yet prepared to spare you, Johnny."

"Will you ever be, captain?"

"No."

After this a step went down the corridor and Johnny Jumpup was the only person standing on the spot that step had left.

Gideon Goldbar continued on for some distance, all the time listening over his shoulder.

Not a sound came from the man he had left behind.

He kept on to the mouth of the mine, but he did not push on into the starlight.

"Johnny must have been deceived," he thought to himself. "The best of ears are mistaken sometimes. Johnny is right. I will never see the time when I can spare him. He is the best 'help' I ever saw. Without him I might not be this far in the game to-night and Mona and Veta might not have a friend on the strange trail to No Man's Ground."

Gideon waited a little longer for Johnny Jumpup and as he did not come, he retraced his steps back into the mine.

He went back to where he thought he had left his companion, but found nothing.

Johnny Jumpup had disappeared as if a demon of darkness had spirited him off.

Gideon Goldbar hunted in the gloom awhile, but suddenly, as if he recollects that he was needed elsewhere, he whirled and went to the entrance.

Out of the mine—Mine No. 3—Gideon went, back to the camp near by, and down one of the irregular streets toward the Square.

It did not take more than a glance, and not half a dozen overheard words, to tell him that something had happened.

The Gold Goths formed a crowd near the tree on the Plaza. If any person had taken the trouble to count them, he would have found that all were there.

"It's a clear case o' cold-blooded assassination!" growled some one. "The rascal Julius didn't do it for the committee took care of him on the way up here. And yet no other Goth held a grudge against Macbeth."

By this time a little lane had opened in the crowd, and Gideon Goldbar took advantage of it to go forward.

In a minute he was looking down at a dead man lying on the ground, and twenty pairs of eyes were fixed on him.

"Gentlemen, you want the man who did this do you?" suddenly rang out a voice. "Well, there he stands!"

Goldbar turned with a start and saw—

The finger of Boss Nevada covering Dun Duff!

CHAPTER XI.

A COOL HEAD.

Of course words like these directed the gaze of every one to the man thus singled out by the head master of No Man's Ground.

Gideon Goldbar had not witnessed the scene enacted when the Gold Goths learned of the murder of one of their number—Nicol Macbeth,

the man found between the cabins stabbed to the heart and taken off in a twinkling.

Being absent in the mine where he had left Johnny Jumpup waiting for the object which had disturbed them, he had missed the events just mentioned.

But he had come back to camp in time to find the gold-hunters still grouped about the murdered Goth, each and all swearing vengeance of the direst kind.

Not five men of the crowd had seen Dun Duff approach, but the eyes of Boss Nevada—those cold penetrating eyes that seemed to miss nothing, had watched him from the moment of his coming in sight, and he only bided his time when he could break out in startling denunciation.

There was light enough on the spot to bring the tableau out in all its fitness.

Dun Duff met the looks of his accuser and the Goths with a coolness that surprised men accustomed to cool desperadoes.

Not a muscle seemed to move, and the figure, straight before appeared, to lengthen a mite.

It was a bold charge, but it had been made by a bold man.

Boss Nevada evidently thought of his last words to Opal—that he intended to "make safe the secret of No Man's Ground," whatever it was, and there came back to him as the accusation poured over his lip the writing which Norgan's chemical had brought out on the paper.

Dun Duff was not standing five feet from the dead.

There was nothing between him and Macbeth but the space across which the corpse had lately been carried.

"Gentlemen, one and all, I accuse that man," continued Boss Nevada, with five seconds between his first words and the present ones. "You see that the man on the ground has been murdered. The bowie stab settles that beyond doubt. I happen to know that Dun Duff there has more than one name, that he is here for a purpose inimical to the rights of Satan City. I order him under arrest!"

Everybody expected an outburst of rage and denial. They looked for some quick shooting, but none came.

On the contrary, a strange smile lit up Dun Duff's eyes. He looked at Boss Nevada as if he would look him through, and then his eyes wandered past the Goths to the figure on the ground.

"The dead can't talk," said he in tones that betrayed no excitement. "If the lips yonder could move as they have often moved I would be willing to rest my case with them. My work, eh? Gentlemen, Dun Duff is at your disposal."

So calmly and cool, without the semblance of fear or resentment were these words spoken that even Boss Nevada wondered what kind of man he had accused.

"We will test all that," he replied and then he looked at the men who watched him. "Men of No Man's Ground, I order that man into custody."

Several citizens of the camp stepped forward and Dun Duff was formally taken for the murder of Nicol Macbeth.

The gold-miners looked at one another, but did not comment on the situation.

Boss Nevada walked away.

"What's to be done next, captain?" asked a voice at his elbow as a finger touched his arm.

"You ought to know, Norgan," was the quick retort as the master of No Man's Ground looked down into the face of the camp assayer.

"What is your proof?"

"Proof, my man?" laughed Nevada. "Do you forget already about the secret command in the letter?"

Norgan shook his head.

"I have taken time by the forelock," resumed the crippled nabob's agent. "We had to do it. Dun Duff is already in toils from which there can be no escape. You saw the menacing looks of the Gold Goths?"

"Yes."

"Well, don't you know that they are ready to fly at Dun Duff and take vengeance for the murder that has been committed? I could lift a finger and launch the whole lot at him like a pack of half-starved wolves."

"Will you do it?"

"Not just now at least."

"I see. You want to see first what sort of hand Dun Duff holds. You would like to know why he came to No Man's Ground under a name which is not his true one?"

"I would like to know that, Norgan," rejoined Boss Nevada. "Of course my opinion is that the secret brought him. If not the Colonel would not have written the merciless command in the message. We hold the fort at any cost, and a part of that cost must be the life of the man now under arrest."

"What of the other man?"

"What man?"

"Gideon Goldbar."

"One man at a time," was the quick response.

"Come with me, Norgan."

The two men walked to Boss Nevada's cabin and when the captain had shut the door, he took from his bosom the sheet of paper and the

stub of red sealing wax which he had taken from the desk in the office.

"You see I am ready to write out the report," he observed to Norgan holding the objects before his companion's eyes. "To-morrow, Norgan, you shall set out for Sacramento with some good news for the master."

"So early, captain?"

"Why not? Do you think I am going to let the fish in the net cut the meshes and get into deep water? No, Norgan, my man. We did not blunder when we had Mark Moline's case in hand. We shall not blunder now."

"A blunder would be fatal."

"It would give Dan Duff more than a breathing spell," continued Boss Nevada quickly. "Give him that and the secret is no longer safe. No, the prisoner under arrest is already condemned, and condemnation on No Man's Ground means death. You will go back to the crowd on the Plaza. Feel the pulse there. If it beats fast don't do any thing to decrease it. See the pards and drop a word here and there. The coolness of the man can't preserve him. By the eternal heavens, if he had everything in his favor he should not escape."

Norgan the assayer locked at Boss Nevada as the clinched hand came down on the table by way of emphasis, and then walked from the hut leaving the master spirit of Shasta-land alone.

"It must be quick work to catch this cool-head," murmured Norgan. "I don't surrender my previously-formed opinion—that both Gideon Goldbar and Dun Duff came here on the same errand. Time will prove it."

The suspicious assayer went back to the Square.

Somebody—one of the Goths, perhaps—had covered the corpse with a blanket, and no one was near it now.

Across the "open" stood the door of Shasta Sam's saloon invitingly wide, and Norgan could see that it was well filled with a crowd, whose single topic, of course, was the murder and the arrest.

A singular curiosity took possession of Norgan, when he found himself near the covered figure under the tree.

It drew him toward it almost irresistibly, and in a moment he was leaning over the blanket.

Overhead a full moon was shining brightly, having just passed from behind a dark veil of clouds, and Norgan thought himself the only living person on the scene.

"I'll take a look at the man destined in death to euer Dun Duff's hand," thought he.

Then he lifted one corner of the blanket and held it up so that the moonlight could fall on the face on which had set the mute stare of the dead.

He looked at Macbeth several seconds.

"He came a long distance to get the knife. He should not have recognized Dun Duff," murmured Norgan. "A man who will be avenged in a few hours! Ah! good-night forever, Goth."

The assayer was lowering the blanket when he was touched from behind.

"Let me see him, please."

The corner of the mountain shroud nearly dropped from Norgan's hand, but he looked around to stare at the calm and white face of Opal.

"You here?" he stammered. "Don't you know, girl, that Captain Nevada—"

"Yes, I know," broke in the beauty of No Man's Ground. "I know that I was to keep to my cabin all night, that I had orders from the autocrat of this wild land to that effect; but I am here, for all that, Norgan. I want to see the face you were covering."

It was next to impossible to prevent Opal from having her way. She was on the ground, her hand had been transferred from his sleeve to the shroud itself. If he did not lift it for her it would be raised all the same.

With a wondering look at the girl who had boldly disobeyed the commands of Boss Nevada, Norgan threw back the blanket again.

Opal uttered a light cry as she leant over the body and looked down into the face revealed by the moonlight.

He watched her till she had taken her look and stood erect again. Then her hands took the blanket from his clutch and with the tenderness of a sister she covered the dead with it, arranging the folds till they did not look as rough as before.

"Somebody is going to pay for this, ain't they, Norgan?" she asked.

The assayer nodded.

"Who is the man they have arrested for the deed?"

"Dun Duff."

While he answered, Norgan could not but wonder how Opal had heard of the accusation and arrest.

"Is he guilty?"

It was a strange question.

"Is he guilty?" echoed the assayer, as he allowed a smile to part his lips. "Opal, do you think they would charge an innocent man with such a crime here?"

"I hope not," rejoined the girl.

"I think not," answered Norgan.

Opal looked down at the blanketed figure

again, and then lifting her head suddenly, sent a glance toward the saloon.

"I want the guilty punished—the guilty, mind you, Norgan," she said to her companion.

The emphasis on the last several words did not escape the assayer's perception.

"The guilty shall not escape," he exclaimed.

"Boss Nevada made the accusation before the crowd, and he takes no steps without looking ahead."

"True, true," muttered Opal. "He is always looking ahead. He knows but one thing—but one above all others, I mean, and that is to serve the man in the South. But Boss Nevada wants to get the right man this time. A murder has been committed, a man has been accused—arrested. I say once more, Norgan, be sure that Dun Duff is guilty before you take blood for blood."

"What! don't you think he is?" exclaimed the assayer. "Are you going to say that Boss Nevada has pointed out the wrong man?"

Opal gave him a mystical look.

"Remember, I say nothing," said she.

CHAPTER XII.

A TURN IN THE GAME.

NORGAN looked curiously after Opal, as she walked away, with her last words ringing in his ears.

What did the girl mean, anyhow?

He dared not go to Boss Nevada with a report of what he had heard, for he did not want Opal to fall under his displeasure for a disobedience of orders, and he knew that the girl would give him no explanation of her words if he followed her for that purpose.

Therefore the assayer of No Man's Ground resolved to let Opal return to her abode unmolested and unbetrayed while he sought out for himself the meaning of her strange sentence:

"Remember, I say nothing!"

"If," said Norgan to himself, "she knows something calculated to break the force of Dun Duff's accusation and arrest, she may forget her allegiance to the Colonel long enough to give the man the breathing period he must not have. Dun Duff must die. More than this: he must die for the murder of Nicol Macbeth the Gold Goth. He is the most dangerous man of the two. He is cooler than Gideon Goldbar, and if he breaks through the meshes as Captain Nevada says, we must fight to keep the secret of No Man's Ground."

Norgan crossed the Square to the mountain saloon where the Goths crowded and discussed the last events.

They had already forgotten Boss Nevada's promise that they should be taken through the mines on the following day. They did not talk of dust, lodes, pay-streaks and pockets. They put their heads together, beard touching beard in many instances, and talked darkly and menacingly of two men—Dun Duff and Nicol Macbeth.

Nobody noticed Norgan's appearance in the den, and he was permitted to hear a good deal without being disturbed.

"I could touch off a magazine with a very small match," thought the assayer. "The powder is here and the match is to hand. A dozen words would precipitate fifty uncontrollable cool heads upon Dun Duff, and he would go out like a candle."

Norgan argued the case with himself while he listened and looked. At one time he thought of setting off the magazine, at another he decided to let Boss Nevada play his hand out.

All at once the assayer saw a man who had walked quietly into the place.

It was Gideon Goldbar his other suspect.

"Dun Duff's masked pard!" resumed Norgan. "Two men like those don't come to a place like this at nearly the same time without being allies. The same designs animate them; the same thoughts spur them to action. Can't you see, Boss Nevada, that we have two men to deal with?"

While Norgan watched Goldbar he saw him join a group of Goths and crossing the bar-room he secured a good position for listening.

"What think you, pard?" suddenly asked one of the Goths wheeling upon Gideon who had put in a word which was calculated to call forth the question.

"I think it is not a clear case," was the response. "No proof has yet been offered. We have nothing but the accusation."

"I thought so! Talking for his pard already," mentally ejaculated Norgan. "What more is needed to make the chain complete?"

"You are right," replied one of the Goths. "Boss Nevada has offered nothing in proof of his charge. Dun Duff met it coolly."

"But there was a derisive smile at his mouth."

"I saw it, too."

"It seemed to say: 'Gentlemen, I'd like to see you prove anything. I hold the best hand just now. Prove it if you can!'"

There were several echoing nods to these words.

"Very well, gentlemen," rejoined Gideon Goldbar, calmly. "Let us be sure we have the right man. As much as we love justice we can not afford to send Dun Duff, whatever his record, to his death innocent of this charge."

Goldbar left the group with these words. He

was followed by a dozen pair of eyes as keen as his own.

"Who is that man?" asked several Goths.

"Calls himself Goldbar."

"He didn't come with us?"

"No, he was here when we came."

"So was Dun Duff."

"Of course."

"What have they done with the prisoner?"

It was the most natural thing in the world that this question should be asked.

Norgan himself was not prepared to answer it though it had not been put to him.

He did not know what had become of the man accused of murder.

"May be I had better investigate," he thought, and the following moment he betook his presence from the saloon and went in search of Dun Duff.

Fortunately for the assayer's patience, the accused was not as hard to find as a bonanza.

He went to a cabin considerably larger than its immediate neighbors, and found two dark figures on guard before the door.

At once he knew where Dun Duff was.

Beyond the little square window at one side of the portal burned a light, and Norgan was permitted by the guards to lean forward and look inside.

Leaning against the log wall, with his arms folded upon his chest, which was ample enough for any one, and looking down at a man at the table in the middle of the room, stood the most prominent man in Satan City at that time.

Dun Duff had doffed his hat, and one of his hands had brushed back from his forehead his glossy black hair.

He made a striking picture for the inquiring and interested Norgan, and for some time he saw Dun Duff only and not the man designated by Boss Nevada to keep him company till the hour of his doom.

"What does he say?" asked the assayer, as he turned from the window.

This he addressed to one of the guards in a whisper.

"Nothing."

"You mean that he neither affirms nor denies?"

"Yes."

"But he has spoken about—about the dead Goth since the arrest, hasn't he?"

"Oh, yes."

"Well?"

"He merely says that he did not come to No Man's Ground to take life."

"Which is no denial of the crime. Circumstances may have caused him to silence Nicol Macbeth."

"The Goth may have been a spy at his heels."

"That is true."

Norgan glanced at the window again, and saw the figure of Dun Duff the same as before, leaning against the wall with folded arms.

"Do you think he has told Modoc anything?"

Modoc was the guard inside.

"He has talked a good deal with him," rejoined the guard. "But talking won't save him. The secret message on the letter seals his doom. Boss Nevada won't turn him over to the Goths. He has settled that. Dun Duff is to get the full benefit of the code."

"When? Has the time been fixed?"

"It has, but nobody knows it exactly but Captain Nevada. It may not be before daylight; it may begin during the next hour. You know we hold court here at all seasons."

Norgan did not have to have his memory thus refreshed.

The unflinching court of No Man's Ground was ready to open at any time, to try, to condemn, to acquit or hang.

"But," said he to himself, "I want to know when it is to sit on Dun Duff's case. It must be before Opal has a chance to put in a word or a hand for him." And then he added, as he had added before, at the close of his reflections:

"That man must die!"

Let us follow Norgan as he walks away.

His last look had been through the little window of the cabin, and for the last time he saw the bronzed sphinx against the wall.

The sight seemed to lend speed to his limbs.

He went straight to Boss Nevada's cabin, but it was empty when he entered.

"At the office, mebbe," ejaculated Norgan, turning away.

Going down the rambling street of Satan City he looked into Opal's abode, but saw nothing, for the interior was dark and silent.

Norgan kept on till he had left the last shanty behind him.

He seemed to vanish among the shadows that lay thick everywhere, and five minutes later his footfalls echoed in a small chamber undoubtedly below the surface.

The assayer of No Man's Ground was in the mysterious "office" across whose threshold the feet of very few men were permitted to pass.

"Captain Nevada!" spoke Norgan, leaning forward into the darkness.

There was no answer.

He called again, a little louder than before.

"I'll try the door of the crypt," he said, to himself. "He may be there. If he is not—"

At this moment the chemist pitched forward over some obstacle at his feet. He did not recover till he had fallen against the wall which he could not see.

A nameless thrill told him that he had found the autocrat of No Man's Ground!

Coming back to the thing that had tripped him, Norgan scraped a lucifer along the stone.

"Captain Nevada, by the fumes of Tartarus!" broke over his lips, and then he was glaring at the scene revealed by his match.

At full length on the stone floor of "the office" lay the man of men on No Man's Ground.

Boss Nevada looked like one dead and dead he was to Norgan.

"The pard did this!" came through Norgan's teeth. "Don't I know that those two men came here as twin angels of destruction? Ha! what is this! A paper in the captain's clutch?"

The excited assayer of Shasta land darted at the object his eyes had discovered, but the fingers of the nabob's agent had closed on it like the fingers of death.

He had to take both hands to the task before him, and it took all his strength to loosen the relentless grip.

Norgan tore the paper several times in getting possession of it, but at last he sprung up with an exclamation of triumph, and bunched five matches for his lamp.

Thrusting the little candle into a hole in the desk half-way in the wall the assayer looked at his prize. He had to smooth the pieces out and put them together one by one.

When he had finished he leant over his work breathless and white.

"To the Colonel at once!" he read. "Take the packet from my bosom and go! Speak to no man till you see him. The oath—the oath! The time has come!"

Norgan staggered back and cried:

"Captain Nevada, I obey!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE QUEEN OF DARKNESS.

The assayer of No Man's Ground found it hard to keep one part of the command, and that was not to speak to any one in Satan City before leaving it.

He went back to Boss Nevada and found an inside pocket next to his heart. It was sewed shut, but he soon got inside and took therefrom a small flat packet of buckskin which he put carefully away where he felt it would be safe.

"Now for Sacramento, captain," he exclaimed, looking down at the motionless figure on the ground. "There's no telling what will happen here during my absence, but I won't spare horseflesh in getting back as soon as possible."

By this time his torch of matches had flickered and gone out, and a moment later Norgan had left the office and was hastening toward the stables where Boss Nevada's steeds were kept.

He tried to avoid meeting any one, and found the horses without accident.

The captain's favorite was saddled in the darkness and made ready for the ride.

Norgan led him forth and then down to his own shanty. Dropping the lines there he went in.

"I was to speak to no one," said he aloud. "But my hand can talk all the same. I can't go away without leaving some word behind."

He wrote hastily on a bit of paper words like these:

"Captain Nevada is dead in 'The Office'—murdered! I am off with his last message."

To this alarm he signed his name, placed it on the table where it would be seen by the first person seeking him, went out, mounted the horse and rode off.

He left camp in a walk, but no sooner did he reach the suburbs, than he touched the coal-black flanks with the spur, and a horse and his rider headed south went over the trail like a mad Centaur.

There was something wild in Norgan's riding with all speed toward a man hundreds of miles away.

What was the purport of the message he carried in his bosom? What did the words "the time has come" mean? He thought and thought, but did not approach a solution of the mystery.

"They can't blame the murder of Boss Nevada on Dun Duff, for he was under guard when it took place," observed the solitary rider. "Ah! there is the other man—Gideon Goldbar. Where has he been since sundown? Didn't I hear him talking for Dun Duff at Shasta Sam's awhile ago? That is proof enough of pardship. But will the boys see it? I might have put them on the trail by adding a word to the letter I left in the shanty, but I trust to their discernment to see the link that unites the two."

Norgan thought and talked thus to himself while he rode through the wild region of Shasta.

Every now and then he let the horse rest by slackening his gait, but at times he used the spur as if by dint of hard riding he could reach Colonel Bluff by dawn.

We will leave him on the road with a promise to the reader to witness his arrival at his journey's end, and go back to Satan City to scenes that demand our attention,

It was getting late when the door of Opal's abode opened and let the girl out.

Standing before the cabin a few moments she looked across the Plaza and saw the always open door of Shasta Sam's ranch.

The figures of men inside told her who were there, and she even fancied that she could distinguish the Gold Goths from the citizens of No Man's Ground.

A murmur of voices came to her ears from the place, but she could not make out a single word.

"I mystified Norgan with my last declaration," she smiled to herself. "These men who clamor for blood should go a little slow. They are liable to catch the wrong man. The keenest detectives do that sometimes. Here the only thing against Dun Duff is Boss Nevada's accusation. As yet it has not been substantiated by a single proof. How can it be? They searched the man from the South and found on him the usual weapons. I don't like Dun Duff. His eyes tell me that he came to No Man's Ground with evil intent. He seems to be a genius of evil; but if he is innocent of this crime he ought not to suffer."

She left her abode and went down the street till she reached Captain Nevada's cabin.

She rapped at the door, but got no answer.

Opal was disappointed.

"I think I can convince the captain," she murmured. "He is always ready to listen to me. I need not tell him everything, but I can disclose enough."

The beauty of Satan City repeated her raps, but as there was still no answer she opened the latched door and looked in only to find the shanty empty.

"I may find him elsewhere," she exclaimed turning away. "I must see Captain Nevada before the trial."

Going back toward her own home Opal noticed a light in Morgan's window.

Curiosity took her to the spot.

Of course the little cabin was empty, but she saw that which could not have escaped any eye—the message left on the table by the chemist of the camp.

Opal opened the door and went in. The very position of the paper seemed to tell that it had been left for the first comer, and she was that one.

In a second the young girl was reading the startling words in the lamplight, and at the end she fell back with a blanched face and a wild cry.

For a second Opal appeared to lose her self-control. With the message clutched in her hand she leaned against the wall and gasped for breath.

"Another tragedy? My God! what dark spell has fallen over No Man's Ground?" came through her lips. "Why did not Morgan spread the alarm before he went away? What sealed his lips?—a knowledge of the guilty secret?"

The girl darted suddenly from the cabin and ran toward the end of the camp.

"To 'the office' first, to see for myself, next to the men who will have blood for blood. The change has come. We have had peace on No Man's Ground a long time. Dun Duff and Gideon Goldbar, it is against you both that blood has been shed since your coming to us."

Opal did not stop until she had reached the place where Morgan made his discovery a short time before.

Overcome for a moment she halted at the door and caught her breath.

Then, drawing a match across the stone-wall, she touched the flame to the wick of a little wax candle which she had brought with her, and leaned forward with the light in her hand.

Opal soon fell back with a cry which she could not suppress, and the candle nearly dropped from her hand.

She had prepared herself for seeing a dead man on the floor of "the office." Norgan had made this certain by the message he had left behind; but Opal saw nothing of the kind.

Instead of such a spectacle, she saw the figure of a man against the gray wall of "the office."

The face was turned full toward her, and despite the indescribable stare that looked from the eyes, Opal recognized the autocrat of No Man's Ground!

She went forward with his name on her tongue.

"In God's name, Captain Nevada, what has happened?" cried she.

The stare seemed to give way for another look which was but little more intelligible, and as the man started from the wall he laughed strangely.

"You ain't the Queen of Darkness, are you?" Boss Nevada exclaimed. "No; I see you have the features of a Princess of Light, ha, ha, ha!"

"Merciful heavens! is the Captain mad?" thought Opal. "What does he mean? Can it be that he has seen—"

"Where did you come from?" broke in Boss Nevada, ending up with that same laugh which sent a chill through his listener.

"I am Opal. I found Norgan's message on his table, and I came hither at once."

"Then you are not the Queen of Darkness? I am glad of that."

The girl put forth her hand, and laid it softly on Boss Nevada's sleeve.

She had previously placed the candle in a hole in the desk set half-way in the wall, and now she led the master of No Man's Ground to a stool which stood near the desk itself.

He took a seat like a man under a spell, for he drew his hand twice across his forehead, as if to collect his scattered ideas, and then shook his head mournfully.

Opal watched him all the while.

"Can't you tell me what took place here?" she asked, at length.

"Here—here?" he repeated. "The Queen of Darkness, I tell you, child."

"When did she come?" Boss Nevada's answer was a look into Opal's eyes, and the showing of his teeth in an insane grin.

The girl instinctively drew back.

"The man is mad," she cried. "I wonder if he really saw the Queen of Darkness, as he calls the woman who seems to possess him like a demon? It is not safe for me to stay here, for there is no telling what freak the man may not take."

There was no longer a doubt of Boss Nevada's condition in Opal's mind. What she thought at that moment cannot be told, but out of it all she knew that she was not safe in "the office" with the madman of Satan City.

To get away was no easy task.

Her first move in direction of the door was checked by the captain of the camp, but Opal broke from his grasp before it closed, and in a second she was out of the chamber, running with all her might.

It was back to the camp as soon as she could get there!

Opal reached the Square to find it untenanted. Straight ahead she saw the open door of Shasta Sam's saloon, and the same figures were beyond it.

"I want to keep this tragedy from the Goths," thought she. "If Captain Nevada was in either of the other mines, I could tell them, too; but he is in 'the office,' which no Goth must enter."

She went toward the Shasta Ranch, hoping to call from it a prominent citizen of No Man's Ground, but she was not accorded that privilege.

Three giants in bronze and flannel came out ere she reached the door.

"The men I want!" ejaculated Opal, and in a second she stood before them all.

"Gentlemen, you are needed at the office at once!" cried the girl. "Captain Nevada is there without a sane thought in his head. Go to your master!"

She bounded away without another word, and the Satan City trio, after gazing after her till she vanished, walked rapidly toward the secret mine of the mountains.

"It's the girl that's mad—not Boss Nevada!" said one. "But we'll go and see." And they went down to "the office" to find no trace of the man they sought.

CHAPTER XIV.

IN THE CRYPT.

In the light struck for their search, the three inhabitants of No Man's Ground looked at each other surprised and amazed.

"The captain isn't here!" suddenly exclaimed one.

"Of course not."

"I'm inclined to think there's a hoax somewhere."

"Would Opal play a trick on us?"

"Not a trick o' this sort, I'm thinking."

"It would be too serious. No, the girl saw something here awhile ago. She would not have said that Boss Nevada was here crazy if she had nothing to back her up in it. We must search the mine."

Having agreed that this was the proper course to pursue, the three men went about it at once.

Provided with a small but powerful dark-lantern which they found in the desk in the wall, they left "the office" and filed down a narrow corridor which seemed to lead deeper into the bowels of the earth.

"Here is the crypt," spoke the foremost, looking back at his companions as he let his light fall upon a small iron door firmly placed in a wall before them.

"Who knows the combination?"

"I think I can open the door."

The iron portal was furnished with a burnished combination-knob, which fairly glittered in the light of the bull's-eye, and the man who thought he could manipulate the lock, went to work immediately.

"This isn't exactly in keeping with the orders," remarked one of the two watchers after a minute's work.

The man at the lock looked up.

"I know it isn't, Tiger, but I call this an extraordinary case. Captain Nevada, our master, is supposed to be crazy somewhere in this mine, and it's our duty to find him."

"No man is to open that door but Boss Nevada and the persons designated by him."

"That is true, but—"

"You urge necessity again, Lolas?"

"I do. The more I think of what Opal told

us, the stronger grows my belief that we ought to do what we are doing now."

Tiger took a long breath and stepped back.

"Go ahead," said he, with a gesture, but this was unnecessary, for Lolas had already gone back to the combination.

For ten minutes he worked with the patience of an expert.

At last he looked at his companions with a smile of satisfaction.

"It is done. The way to the crypt of No Man's Ground is open."

"We are going onto forbidden ground," said the one called Tiger. "No living man has ever crossed the threshold of that room but Boss Nevada. He alone knows what is there, and he has never told one of us. I've always had, with the rest of the boys, a desire to explore the crypt, but allegiance to the Colonel and the oath we have taken have held me back."

Lolas put his hand on the nickel knob and opened the heavy door a trifle.

"I recollect when this door came up from Sacramento," he mentioned. "I was one who helped to fit it in its iron frame in the stone. When it was there you know how Captain Nevada called all of us together and read the law of the crypt to us."

The two men who listened answered with affirmative nods.

"Now we break the rule, but only because we have to. If the captain is in the state reported by Opal we must take him to the old cabin and treat him there. The Goths must not be led to this place no matter what has occurred. Dun Duff brings a shadow to No Man's Ground, but he will soon be out of the way. And his pard with him I hope."

Lolas swung the door back, and all three men leaned forward and looked in.

The lantern's bull's-eye was brought to bear upon the interior of the forbidden mysterious mine-chamber of the bonanza king.

"We must go in," resumed Lolas.

"All of us?"

"Why not? The crypt had several corridors, you remember, before the door was put in and three can reach them quicker than one."

"That is true."

Lolas the locksmith handed the lantern to one of his pards and crept into the silent chamber.

Beyond the door he could stand erect.

He was joined by his comrades and the three started across the low-vaulted room in which they found themselves.

"Take the right-hand side first," advised Lolas, and when he had progressed a few feet he stopped suddenly and exclaimed:

"Hello! what is this?"

In a moment the three pards of Satan City were bending over a box which lay on its side with the disengaged top near by.

A number of little packages lay around apparently as they had fallen from the box which appeared to have been overturned by violence.

"The Colonel's treasures," smiled Lolas. "The gold of the great bonanza of No Man's Ground."

The outer wrapping of each package was buckskin as soft as silk to the touch, and as each one weighed at least a pound the box was a veritable treasury.

"This is not the captain. Come on!" laughed Lolas and the box and its late contents were left to themselves.

The three men pushed into a dark little annex, the ceiling of which they could not reach with uplifted hands.

They showered the light of the lantern on the walls, and found half a score of niches, each one filled with little boxes covered with rust, for they were iron.

"Havens! what was that?" suddenly cried Tiger as a singular noise smote their ears.

The pards stood spell-bound.

There was no repetition of the sound.

"What did it sound like to you, Tiger?" queried Lolas.

"I dread to mention it."

"Do you think—"

"That it was the door of the crypt? Yes? yes?"

"My God!" and Lolas went back almost his length while his face lost its color, and the lantern shook.

In a second the men had left the annex and were hurrying toward the door.

"I thought so!" cried Tiger pointing forward as he halted. "Look for yourselves. Boss Nevada or somebody else has shut us in here to die the most miserable of deaths!"

Appalling as the words were they were not more so than was the situation as it looked to the three comrades.

The iron door of the bonanza crypt which they had left ajar was now tightly shut, and when Lolas, the Hercules of No Man's Ground, tested it with his strength he found it as immovable as a mountain of solid rock.

The door had not shut of its own accord. That was impossible. It had been closed by human agency, from the outside, and the means of opening it was there and nowhere else!

For several minutes a deep silence fell around the imprisoned men.

They looked at one another without saying a

word and their faces appeared ghostly in the light of the bull's-eye.

All at once Lolas shut his teeth hard and went at the door again.

He was joined by Tiger, a man as strong as himself, but the combined strength of the two could effect nothing.

"Who did it?" asked Tiger, his eyes reving to the door as if it was impossible to keep them elsewhere a single minute.

"Who but Boss Nevada?" was the answer.

"Why did he not investigate?"

"Ask him!" cried Lolas frowning. "I am in no mood to discuss our situation. If there is no other exit from this place than the door, we are doomed to perish like rats in a trap."

"We must find a way."

"We must or die!"

For the next hour the three pards examined their prison with the minuteness of experts.

They followed the little annexes to their ends, and sent the light of their lantern over every square inch of stone.

At last their hunt brought them back to the closed door.

It was as solid as before.

There they stood and looked at the iron-rimmed door like wolves in a trap.

"Curses Boss Nevada! Curse No Man's Ground!" cried Lolas. "Was it to die like a trapped fox that I came here in the service of the paralytic millionaire? I've served him only too well. I've kept the secret of Shasta at the risk of my life. I know more than he thinks I do."

The last sentence drew the close attention of Tiger and his companion.

"What do you know, Lolas?" Tiger asked.

"No, gentlemen, not yet," laughed Lolas. "I am not ready to pass in my checks and tell all I know."

"What else can we do, shut up here, with the will of a crazy man between us and escape? I know secrets as well as other people do—as well as yourself, for that matter, Lolas. I can write on you wall a sentence that might give you a thrill."

"Hal think you so, Tiger?" And Lolas glanced from the speaker to the cold stone behind him.

"I have said so."

"Try it! Yonder is the wall, Captain Tiger, and just behind you you'll find some pieces of reddish stone that will make a mark on the surface."

"What will you wager that I can't astonish you, Lolas?"

"All the dust I have in camp, dust which I may never touch again, against yours in the same condition."

A laugh burst from Tiger's throat.

"By Jupiter! I accept!" cried he. "Broad-edge Bill here is the witness. Something that will surprise you, Lolas? Well, here I go."

Tiger leant over a little heap of reddish fragments of stone, and selected a piece rather pointed at one end.

"Throw the light away from the wall while I write," said he to Lolas. "I can write in the dark. There, that will do."

For a little while the hand of Tiger moved the improvised pencil across the surface of the wall.

He was not a finished penman at any time, but when it came to writing on stone he was worse still.

"Now with your light, Lolas!" he suddenly exclaimed, stepping back and throwing down the stone pencil.

In an instant the light of the lantern was thrown upon the wall, and Lolas uttered a cry as he saw written there:

"The person who killed Macbeth the Goth is the wife of Colonel Bluff, the Nabob of Sacramento!"

"Come! I thought so!" laughed Tiger, as Lolas continued to stare at the writing on the stone. "You are a beggar the moment we get out of here!"

CHAPTER XV.

WHO SHUT THE DOOR?

SOMEBODY had shut the door of the crypt, thus entombing alive Lolas and his companions; but who had done the deed?

Let us see.

At the moment when the three men were examining the contents of one of the little chambers within the subterranean room, a figure came down the main corridor of the mine and listened at the door that stood ajar.

This person was a man with a splendid physique. He had the herculean breadth of chest and the arms of an Ajax.

If the light of the trio's bull's-eye had fallen on his face, it would have revealed eyes that had a wild, insane stare.

He had no hat. Whether he had lost it or not, or whether he carried it in the hand he held behind his back, is not essential to the movement of our story. His abundance of black hair, some of which fell over his shoulders, needed no covering.

He could bear the voices of the three men in the crypt; he saw the beams of light flashed from the lantern, and while he looked and listened, a strange tremor passed over his frame.

Suddenly he fell back and caught the heavy iron door set in the rock.

The mad eyes danced now. Certainly they were those of a maniac!

"I shut the rats up in the trap. They will never get out while water runs," said he, and then a devilish chuckle broke over his lips.

The next second the door shut with a thud, and twisting the nickel-plated knob with a snarl of rage, the man turned and ran toward the mouth of the mine, laughing under his breath all the while.

Once out in the night with the starlight falling on his face, he stood revealed as Boss Nevada.

The very looks of the man told that reason was trembling on her throne, even if she had not been deposed.

He sent a wild look back toward the mine, then started off, and soon stood among the cabins of Satan City.

Nobody had followed him, and no one saw him as he crossed the Square and looked into Shasta Sam's den through the window.

When he had looked a while, he sneaked off and disappeared.

Five minutes afterward the door of a certain cabin was opened, and the prettiest face in the camp looked in.

"My God! Has he come back of his own accord?" exclaimed a woman's voice, and while the words sounded, Opal entered the shanty.

Before her stretched on the low and roughly shaped bedstead of mountain pine lay the figure of the autocrat of No Man's Ground.

Sound asleep!

A lamp burned on the table above the cot and its light fell across the bed and on the swarthy face of the sleeper.

Opal took the lamp and leant forward with it in her hand.

For several minutes she gazed steadily at Boss Nevada, who was wholly unconscious of her presence, and while she looked, his deep, almost unnatural breathings filled the but.

"Perhaps I had better let him sleep," thought the girl. "I left him for dead on the floor of 'the office,' but here he is worth a dozen dead men. If Norgan knew this he would turn back on the way to Sacramento. But he can't be reached now; he will have to go on."

Setting the lamp down Opal looked for the last time at the boss of Satan City and turned away.

As she did so the bronzed hand which had lain across the miner's breast dropped suddenly to the floor and opened. Something fell out and glittered in the light.

The girl started forward with suddenly dilated eyes and picked the object up. She held in her hand a Mexican button made of brass and stamped with the arms of that country.

She could not suppress a smile as she gazed at the find, for a Mexican button was perhaps the last thing she thought of discovering in Boss Nevada's grip.

Opal took it to the light for examination, and in a moment she was bending over the table oblivious of everything else but the button.

"That this should be in Captain Nevada's hand to-night is the strangest thing I can think of," murmured she. "Was it there when I found him lying in 'the office'?" Did he tear it from the coat of the person who assailed him? Ah! can it be that I have found a clew to another great episode of No Man's Ground?"

It was most natural for Opal to answer her last question in the affirmative. She was doing this in her mind while she unconsciously twisted the Mexican button between finger and thumb, when lo! the top came off, and she held a part in either hand.

If Boss Nevada had sprung to his feet Opal would have been none the less astonished.

She looked at the man of Satan City, wondering if her unexpected cry would not disturb him, but he slept on as if the last trump could not rouse him.

The main part of the button, the bowl, as it were, lay in her left hand.

It was filled with something like tissue-paper, and Opal was not long in taking it out.

Beneath the paper, when she had removed it, she found a little white ball, not much larger than a common shot.

It only served to increase her curiosity.

Opal took it out, and found it to be paper, carefully compressed into a sphere which, when she manipulated it a little, opened readily.

Again she glanced at the figure on the cot.

She was going rather far with her find; she was prying into something which might be a secret never intended for her bosom.

But she had gone too far to recede. She could not beat back the curiosity that had taken full possession of her, but would know what was in the paper ball if her life had to answer for her temerity, and while she smoothed it out under the lamp she saw that it was covered with writing.

"If I read it here I can put it back into his hand," thought the Seraph of Satan City. "If I carry it off he might miss it, and then—"

She stopped when she thought of what the consequences would be.

Nothing was heard in the shanty but the

breathings of Boss Nevada, while Opal, holding her own breath, began to read the message of the button.

She saw at once that the writing was in no familiar hand, that it was cramped, and, at some places, almost undecipherable because it was so, but she did not despair of her task.

"A secret," decided Opal; "a secret never intended for me. I can't hold myself from it. Good or evil, I go on."

Then with eager eyes she read in silence. Her color changed more than once; the paper shook in her hands, but each time she clutched it anew and read on to the end.

"In the name of heaven! how did the Mexican button fall into Boss Nevada's hands?" she exclaimed. "I never heard that he had a treasure of this kind. Certainly he never wore it on his clothes. Did the person who encountered him in 'the office'—the somebody who met him there—lose it in the struggle? If so I want to find that person. I must find him for—"

Her eyes became fixed on the paper again, and once more she read the secret which ran as follows:

"The vengeance of the gods is a clever fiction.

"I have waited for it till patience is no longer one of the virtues.

"I have looked for the child of my heart, snatched from me when she was beginning to love me, until my eyes are weary.

"She comes not like vengeance to the bar of justice with the head of the evil-doer.

"My life goes out like the vanishing of a candle's flame.

"I hear the voice of my baby girl, but it is far away, calling me across the river of death.

"I have sent man after man to the trail, but they never come, or say that it is lost forever.

"Those who know, or who ought to know, I will never ask. No! I will turn my face from them and shutting my lips, will die first without a murmur.

"I have the pointless dagger blade. Who has the point and the hilt?

"My child somewhere has a name, but not the one I gave her. She was Ruby to me, though he wanted to call her Opal, or Beryl.

"I have written this for the button of my last sleuth-hound. I have sent him on the trail which seems to lose itself in the darkness like a path that goes down into a mine.

"I am Mona the woman who has sat for years on the moss grown steps of the court of justice.

"I have waited for steps I have never heard—the steps of retribution dragging the king villain of the world at her heels.

"My God! hear me for the last time. Let my Mexican sleuth find my own!—let him stand before me and say: 'Behold the day of justice!'

"Done in my prison, this day, June 10th, 187—.

MONA."

Is it a wonder that Opal read these startling sentences the third time before she stopped?

"What is this?" she cried, at last. "Who is this woman whose life has been a hunt for the lost, a campaign for vengeance. Why has she not taken the trail herself? Ah! I see: 'Done in prison'! Where is her prison? Is she there yet?"

The girl was excited.

She forgot the man lying on the cot.

"If the Mexican button did not fall into Boss Nevada's hands to-night, when?" she went on.

"Somebody wanted to call the lost child Opal. That is my name. Is this a wild coincidence, or is it a terrible revelation of the past?"

It was some time before Opal was calm enough to proceed.

At last she carefully and deftly rolled the strange message into the same sphere it had been. She put it back into the bowl of the button and covered it with the tissue paper, then she screwed on the metallic top, but with trembling hands and turned to Boss Nevada.

The hand which had fallen to the floor had found the breast again, and bending over it, Opal dexterously dropped the button between the half-open fingers.

The touch did not rouse the Boss of No Man's Ground, and, as the girl drew back, a singular smile—a dreamer's—came to his face.

"I want this secret worked out," said she.

"I want to know who Mona is!"

She went to the door of the hut, and saw a tumult on the Plaza where half a dozen lights flashed.

Had Lolas and his companions come back from the mine and reported that Captain Nevada was lost?

She could think of nothing else.

"I hear strange voices!" she exclaimed, still watching the tumult on the Square. "They must belong to the Goths."

The following moment a figure approached swiftly and halted before her.

Opal drawing back placed herself between the man and the door.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Is the captain in?"

"What if he is?"

"Then we want him down yonder. The Gold Goths want blood. They are about to advance and take the prisoner out."

"Dun Duff?"

"Dun Duff!"

CHAPTER XVI.

MONA'S SLEUTH-HOUND.

"THEY have no right to that man!" cried

Opal. "They don't know that he is the murderer of Nicol Macbeth, their comrade."

"It'd do them no good to tell them that, miss," answered the man.

"Perbaps not. If they are bent on blood they won't stop short of it."

"Of course not. If Captain Nevada was to go to the scene before the crowd got fairly started—"

"But he is asleep."

The miner stepped to the window alongside the door and looked into the cabin.

"Asleep? not now, miss?" he cried, turning to Opal.

"Not asleep? He was a moment ago."

"Look at him, Opal."

The beauty of No Man's ground was doing this already.

Sure enough, Boss Nevada was asleep no longer.

He stood in the middle of the floor as if he had just sprung from the cot, and his eyes were fastened on the door.

"I can tell him how the land lies down yonder," continued the man. "The boys sent me. If we hold back we'll not get to fluish Dun Duff ourselves."

Opal caught the miner's sleeve and held him back.

"I will go. Something has happened to the captain, and he is not in a condition to be suddenly confronted by you."

"What has happened?"

She did not wait to reply, but opened the door as softly as possible and glided into the cabin.

She could not help glancing at Boss Nevada's hands, which were only half-closed at his sides. Nothing was seen of the Mexican button.

"You? ha! ha! ha!" laughed the man of Satan City when he caught sight of Opal, and the girl stopped short on account of the demonism that pervaded his merriment.

"No, you are not the Queen of the Darkness. I see now. You have not her face nor her hands, hot as fire and keen as talons."

Opal looked toward the open door.

The miner was there, mystery and horror on his face and a speechless tongue in his head.

"In fortune's name what does he mean?" she whispered.

"He must be off a trifle here," was the reply, and the speaker touched his head significantly. "You said that something had happened. What did you mean?"

Opal could not reply before Boss Nevada, with an ejaculation that had no sensible meaning, bolted toward the open door.

The girl barely had time to tumble out of his road, and the miner at the portal drew back and escaped being run over.

"The captain is mad!" cried Opal, looking spellbound at the figure vanishing in the starlight toward the Square.

"Mad or not, miss, by Jove! he's going just where they want him," was the response.

"But he will do the wrong thing. Mad people always do that."

"He will toss Duncan Duff into the clutches of the Goths, and the other man, too, may be."

"Well, that would be the wrong thing."

"Eh?"

Opal found herself face to face with the man who was called Lucky Lucifer.

"If those men have no business here why would it be wrong for the captain to give them to the crowd crying for blood on the Square."

"They are guiltless."

"Hai they are, eh? Guiltless of what?"

"Of shedding the blood of Nicol Macbeth."

"Let them prove it."

"They will not get a chance. You know that, Lucky Lucifer."

The miner laughed.

"A moment ago you wanted to send Captain Nevada down to check the Goths. Now you want him to let them kill whom they like. Why this change?"

She was looking the man squarely in the face.

"They're no good," flashed he. "Norgan's chemicals brought out the command that Dun Duff brought unbeknown to himself from the Colonel, our master. This is no secret to you, miss."

"That is true."

"Now what difference does it make who does the work—we or the Goths?"

"He ought to be fairly tried."

"For coming up here with a letter from the Colonel in his bosom?"

"No, for murdering the goldhunter."

Lucky Lucifer looked away and gave a whistle of profound surprise.

"What about the other man, Opal?" he suddenly asked.

"Gideon Goldbar?"

"Yes."

"He has been accused of nothing."

"No, but those of us who have used our eyes have seen several things that look bad for him. They are pards."

"Those two men?"

"Gideon Goldbar and Dun Duff."

"I do not think so," replied the girl calmly.

"What do you know about them?"

"Nothing. I never saw either before they came to No Man's Ground."

"Neither did I, but I didn't have to for that matter. We're all o' one opinion, girl. When you touch one you pinch the other. They belong to the conspiracy; they are the head of the cabal."

"What cabal?"

"The one against the Colonel—the plot against the secret of No Man's Ground. Are you going with me?" I'm off!"

"Yes, I am going along. I want to see the end of this affair."

Lucky Lucifer seemed to be goaded on by the increasing tumult where the lights and the crowd were, and Opal kept at his side as much interested in the outcome as he could be.

Boss Nevada had reached the Square ahead of them.

His well-known figure had been seen first by the comrades who were watching for him and next by the assembled Goths.

In a second the autocrat of No Man's Ground was the central figure of an excited crowd.

He trembled at times from head to foot; then he would drop into a stony calm, and eye those before him in a manner that produced some strange comment.

"We want the man who killed our pard!" Boss Nevada heard from more than one throat at the same time. "Don't we know that everywhere throughout California it is an eye for an eye? Why make an exception of this case? Look hyer, captain. You are the man who first accused him. You know that Macbeth's blood is on his hands. Say that we shall have Dun Duff."

To this the Boss rendered no reply. He stood with his arms crossed on his broad chest and Opal and Lucky Lucifer found him in this attitude when they came up.

The gold-hunters pressed closer around him. They were not vociferous, but their mien was that of cool, unyielding men. Their eyes evinced their secret resolves, and their well-knit figures told how capable they were of carrying those resolutions out.

"Where's the queen—my mad queen?" all at once exclaimed Boss Nevada unbending from the attitude he had struck and sweeping the space before him with his hand.

The men looked at one another.

"You don't mean Opal, captain?" ventured a citizen of Satan City.

"My Queen of the Darkness! Where is she?"

Another perplexed silence.

The impatient Gold Goths began to growl.

Opal had forced her way through a part of the crowd.

"Gentlemen, Captain Nevada is in no condition to decide a question of life and death to-night," she remarked, with every eye upon her as she stood erect in the light.

"What is the matter?"

Look into his eyes. Those who know him best will discover that he is not the man he was yesterday. Something has occurred. A short time ago I found him lying dead, as I thought, in a certain apartment which I will not mention here. I was sent to that place by certain information which led me to believe that I would find him murdered. I saw him next asleep in his own cabin, and while in that condition, I heard him talk about the Queen of the Darkness. Gentlemen, Goth and miner, Captain Nevada is crazy!"

There were numerous exclamations of astonishment at the pronunciation of these words, and in a moment the men had glided back, leaving Boss Nevada to himself in the middle of a larger circle than he had occupied.

"Captain Nevada, will you listen to me?" resumed the girl, fearlessly crossing the space between the madman and herself.

Her tones were soft and winning, but they seemed to grate harshly on the listener's ears.

"You, ha! ha! ha!" he exclaimed in the same manner in which he had received her at the cabin. "You are not the Queen of Darkness—"

"Have a care, girl!" called out several men, but this did not take Opal's hand from Boss Nevada's arm.

"No, I am not she," smiled the girl, meeting calmly the gaze fixed like a stony stare upon her.

"Ho! ho! ho! not my queen, who comes and goes in the night?" was the answer.

"What does he mean? If you know anything, Opal, let us have it."

Still holding to the Californian's arm, she turned to the men who had spoken.

All at once she caught a look fixed intently upon her, and when she attempted to speak, it seemed to keep her silent.

"Gentlemen, about the person he calls the Queen of Darkness, I know but little," said she with a second effort.

"We want that little. It may be a good deal," answered a sonorous voice.

Opal looked again toward the eyes she had just seen. They were still in the same place, but a man near by had shifted his position, and their owner stood revealed.

It was Gideon Goldbar, the Man from the South!

"I will not speak now," continued the girl, addressing the silent impatient crowd.

"Not about the Queen of Darkness?"

"Not about her," and she walked away.

"Let the girl out," said some one.

The crowd parted and made a lane for her, down which she walked to the open beyond.

"Take hold of the captain, thar!" yelled half a dozen men at once.

Opal looked back to see the autocrat of No Man's Ground struggling in the grasp of a dozen miners as strong as himself.

"They moved on him just in time, miss," spoke a voice as a man came up.

"What had happened?"

"He had whipped out his knife and had his eyes on you!"

"On me?" cried Opal, wonderingly. "Ah! his crazed brain must have taken me for the Queen of Darkness."

"Which you are not, girl."

The beauty of Satan City gave the man a sharp look before she spoke again.

"This is a place of mysteries," said she.

"You are not Gideon Goldbar."

"No! I am Mona's sleuth-hound!"

"Mona! My God!" cried Opal.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE TALE OF A CRUTCH.

NOBODY apparently saw Gideon Goldbar and the girl together, and Opal's exclamation had not been heard by the crowd, excited over the actions of the master of No Man's Ground.

"You don't want to stay here," continued Gideon, taking her arm gently, and walking her from the spot.

"Not for the world," she answered, glancing back at Boss Nevada, held by six strong hands. "But, tell me first, do you think the Goths will take Dun Duff out?"

"Not to-night, miss. Enough has occurred to prevent them. The prisoner is safe, and by to-morrow there will be a different feeling toward him."

"Do you think so?"

"I can almost promise this."

Opal looked her thanks into the eyes that seemed to shine with a secret pleasure while their owner spoke.

"You are glad of this, I see," Gideon went on.

"I am," was the frank rejoinder.

He did not press her for an explanation, but it was forthcoming just the same.

"That man is innocent of the charge against him," said she. "He may be guilty of a thousand nameless crimes, but of this one I know he is guiltless. I do not ask what brought him into No Man's Ground. He is under a ban issued by a person who lives hundreds of miles away, and if he escapes the acts of the Gold Goths, he must fly from the shadow of another death."

"You mean from the power of the men of Satan City?"

"Yes."

They were walking toward Opal's cabin, and for several moments after her last reply they went on in silence.

"Why did you start and utter a cry when I told you that I was some one's sleuth-hound?" suddenly asked the man.

Opal started again and looked up.

"Let me keep my secret for the present."

"A secret, is it?"

"A secret—an accidental discovery; one not intended for me. But I would like to ask you one question."

"Go ahead, miss."

The girl appeared to gather strength for an effort which required strength on her part.

"Who is Mona?"

A smile stole over Gideon Goldbar's face.

"You want my secrets, too, I see," replied he, the smile broadening as he spoke.

"If it is one, pardon me. I don't want to be a trespasser on forbidden ground."

"But, you would like a little information regarding Mona, eh?"

"Why not, since you have proclaimed yourself her sleuth?"

"True, girl. Mona is a woman who wants justice."

"Is she in prison?"

"I might answer—yes."

Opal thought of the ending of the paper found in the Mexican button and smiled.

"It is all true, then," she said to herself. "This man comes from Mona, whoever she is. Perhaps he is another man on the trail of the lost child. I believe I have but to ask him to make this discovery, but ought I to go on now? If I do I may find myself revealing the secret of the button. I will betray myself at the same time."

She hesitated, yet her countenance told how anxious she was to proceed.

Gideon Goldbar waited without urging her.

"No,

"Don't you think you are on dangerous ground as well as the man under guard and in the shadow of the noose?"

"What have I done?"

"That is true. What have you done? They already call you Duncan Duff's friend. Under the circumstances isn't that enough?"

"Dun Duff's friend?" echoed Gideon, laughing slightly over his emphasis. "I would like to see them prove that, miss."

Opal could not help staring at him.

"Then they misjudge you," she cried. "Then they—"

"I am a man of duty, nothing more," he interrupted.

"And not his friend?"

"A man of duty, miss."

The beauty of Satan City lifted the latch and opened the door.

"We'll understand all by and by," she spoke over her shoulder. "You can go back to the trail if you are Mona's sleuth-hound. But, you are under suspicion. You don't belong to the Goths and they don't like you. You are not a citizen of Satan City, and her people call you Duncan Duff's friend. There! Good-night, Mona's sleuth-hound," and while Gideon looked the door shut and Opal was gone.

He stared curiously at the cabin a few seconds and then walked back.

"What does she know about Mona?" he ejaculated under his breath. "I did not expect this. Dun Duff is still within the shadow. Boss Nevada's madness, an unaccountable thing by the way, has stepped between for the present. And Norgan the chemist of No Man's Ground has gone post haste to Sacramento. Who sent him thither—the crazy master of this camp of bronzed devils? If so, what is the message he carries to Colonel Bluff imprisoned in his wheeled chair? To-morrow the tide may turn. It is at its flood now for Dun Duff. I his friend? By Jupiter! As I told Mona, I am a man of duty, and the prisoner now watched by several men tigers of the Shasta hills must not walk from the shanty to a noose of any kind. But where is Johnny Jumpup? I left him in the mine waiting in its gloom for the footsteps that followed us. Yes, where is my pard?"

"Captain, I am here!"

Though Gideon had not put his query aloud, it had been answered in a voice that had a familiar sound.

He turned to stand face to face with the man about whose safety he had just been thinking.

"Captain, what sort of people inhabit this country?" continued Johnny Jumpup with a countenance too serious for his usual laugh.

"What kind have you found?"

Gideon Goldbar's pard took a long breath.

"I was left waiting in the mine, you know?"

"Yes."

"Well, I stood there in the darkness fully ten minutes after you left. It was ticklish business—backed up ag'in a wall, waiting for you knew not what."

"I would think so, Johnny."

"I began to think that maybe our ears had fooled us though mine never does that. I could not see my hand at my nose, and as for sound bless me, if I could hear the slightest. At last I did hear something. It was like the scratch of one stone ag'in another. I thought somebody was trying to write on stone in the dark. By and by the noise stopped; then a footstep came toward my post. Such was the silence that hemmed me in that I could have counted the steps of a cat if a cat had made the ones I was listening to, but it did not."

Johnny Jumpup paused for breath.

"Look here, captain," he went on suddenly, throwing back his head and running his hand up and down his throat under his chin. "Do you think a cat would do this?"

Gideon leant forward and saw dark marks on the man's throat.

"They are not scratches, Johnny," he observed.

"I should say not, ha, ha," it was his first laugh. "Well, as I was saying, the steps came closer and closer in the dark. Eyes were no good, and what could I do with my hands? Eh? I moved about noiselessly as I thought best, but heavens, the thing was under me!"

"Under you?" exclaimed Mona's sleuth-hound.

"Yes; nowhar else. All at once it sprung up, grazing me nearly the whole length of my body, and in half a flash I felt my throat in a clutch that made me see the whole planetary system on a rampage. I've heard o' grips before—I've felt several in my time—but none like that devil hand."

"It was a hand, then?"

"Hand I call it—though I ought to say claw. Captain, I was pushed back, almost into that solid wall. It peared to me that I could feel my head sinking into the stone, and my eyeballs seemed to drop out upon my cheeks. Get away at first I could not. I threw up my hands when I could and caught a pair of unseen arms, and then, with all my might, I struggled for Johnny Jumpup's life. But the fiend held on. With all the power of a demon vise the claws retained their hold, and I found myself at last sinking into a pit filled with revolving stars."

"When I came to again, I thought I was in

another world, for all was dark, and my head was a house of torture. I got up and staggered away—groping my way down a dark corridor, without any ideas as to where I was going. Every moment I expected to have the demon of the mine at my back. But I found the mountain air by chance, and then I pitched with a cry of joy into the starlight. Captain, all the wealth of this land of mysteries would not tempt me back into that pit of darkness and death. Now, who is the woman there?"

Gideon looked at Johnny Jumpup as if he had doubted the voice in which the query had been put.

"What woman?" he asked.

"The one who clutched me down in the mine—the queen of that hell of eternal gloom."

"I cannot say. It was a woman, then?"

"A woman. Go down yonder and stand where I stood, captain. Let her come upon you with the tread of the panther and the grip of a vulture. Struggle with her in the dark, and sink at last into what you would call death. What does she guard in the mine? What is the secret she watches over? I would give my head to know."

The Man from the South made no answer.

"What has happened in the camp?" Johnny asked.

"A good deal, and in a part of it I see the hand of the queen of the mine."

"Tell me, Captain Velvet."

Gideon Goldbar gave Johnny an account of Boss Nevada's madness, of the late scene on the Plaza, in short, of everything that had occurred since their separation.

"I can realize what Boss Nevada meant when he spoke of the Queen of Darkness," cried Johnny Jumpup, at the end of the narrative. "But he did not meet her in the same mine where she met me?"

"No. You recollect that Opal found him for dead in a chamber whose whereabouts she would not give us."

"A secret chamber, eh? Yes, it must be so. Perhaps it connects with the mine we visited."

"I cannot say."

Johnny dropped his head and thought a moment.

"I would like to know what took Norgan to Sacramento."

"So would I," said Gideon.

"Could I catch him?"

"No; we must wait. We must see that Dun Duff does not die, for he owns a secret worth millions."

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MAD BOSS.

It was a somewhat singular inquest of lunacy that was held on Boss Nevada between the completion of the exciting scene on the Plaza and the first light of another day.

It took place in Shasta Sam's place, which a lot of men appropriated for the purpose.

The master of No Man's Ground had been escorted back to his own shanty, where it had taken six men to lash him to his bed, and where he lay, in a deep slumber at last, and watched by miners and Goths detailed for the vigils.

There was but one opinion among the men regarding the state of Boss Nevada's mind. He was raving mad for the present.

Some thought that the Queen of Darkness was a myth, the fiction of a diseased brain, and of the whole lot not one argued with an plausibility that such a person could exist.

If Johnny Jumpup had been put upon the stand he might have spun a story which would have put another face on affairs, but no one thought of him, and he was obliged to have but one listener to his marvelous tale.

The gold-hunters were not satisfied that Dun Duff should still live.

They occupied a place to themselves at the inquest, and took but little part beyond delivering a few opinions as to the probable duration of Boss Nevada's lunacy.

It was finally decided, just as day was breaking, that, under the Code of No Man's Ground, Dun Duff could not be tried for the murder of Nicol Macbeth until the prosecuting witness was able to testify.

As this witness was Boss Nevada, whether he knew much or little, the trial would have to be postponed.

The question of bail was soon settled, and Dun Duff stepped from durance in the light of the rising sun a free man on his own recognition.

He could see that the change in his fortunes was distasteful to the hand of California Goths.

He was regarded with lowering looks and muttered sentences, and some of the gold tramps—the whole crowd was little better than this—kept their hands suspiciously near their belts while they eyed him.

All through the long and anxious day Boss Nevada lay strapped on his bed.

More than once Opal stole in to look after his comfort, and toward evening he was permitted to sit up still under guard while she fed him.

There was something pitiable in the sight of the strong man tied like a mad-dog and closely guarded by his companions.

He seemed to realize the state of affairs for

now and then he would look at his bonds and slowly shake his head.

"Norgan?" he said to Opal when the sun was disappearing behind the wooded cone of the gold mountain where it had disappeared day after day for countless ages.

It was the first time he had spoken any one's name since he had been brought to the cabin.

Opal glanced at the guards who had caught the name.

"Leave me alone with him for a spell," she remarked, and with a look at one another the men went out and stood at a respectful distance from the door.

"Where is Norgan, child?" repeated Boss Nevada.

"Do you want to know? Don't you recollect, captain?"

He looked into the liquid depths of her expressive eyes several seconds before he spoke again.

"Has Norgan gone?" he asked.

Opal bent her head.

"To Sacramento?"

"To Sacramento."

"Who sent him?"

The beauty was afraid to reply for the response would recall the past on which he was clearly crazy, and she feared that an outburst of madness would result.

Boss Nevada looked down at his bonds again.

"I know what all these mean," said he with a smile. "They have secured me as they should have done to keep me from doing violence. I don't think I'm mad now, yet I could not ask you to cut the ropes, girl—not for the world. You can talk to me like we have talked together before the curse came to No Man's Ground, and before I saw the Queen of Darkness."

Opal involuntarily drew back.

"He is coming back to it," she thought. "The captain of the Colonel's league will never have his mind again."

Boss Nevada watched her as if he knew what was going on in her mind.

"There! I have dismissed the woman to come back to Norgan," he resumed with a slight gesture. "He has gone to Sacramento. To the Colonel, of course."

"To whom else would he go, Captain Nevada?"

"True, true," with a nod of the head for each word. "Can it be that I sent him?"

"Would he go for any one else?"

"No, no, girl."

"Which horse did he take?"

"Fleetwing."

"Ah! Norgan knows a horse!" laughed the Boss of Satan City. "He will not have to draw rein till he is ready to jump to the ground before the Colonel's house. I wonder what sort of message he carries? Ah! there can be but one!" he exclaimed before Opal could respond. "But one message could ever take Norgan to Sacramento."

She did not seek to know what that message was, but with one of her hands in both of his she looked up in his eyes and waited for him to go on.

For the first time since his mad attack on the Plaza he seemed himself again, and his voice and words gave the girl hope for the future. But there was a lingering flash in his eyes—the same one she had seen when she looked back and saw him in the grasp of miners and Goths.

"Put your hand next to my heart, Opal," he went on. "Put it under the shirt. There! that is right, child. What do you feel there?"

"Nothing, Captain Nevada."

"Ha! nothing?"

"Nothing but flesh, your own."

"But you find a pocket in the shirt?"

"Yes, I have found that."

"Well?"

"It is empty."

He looked incredulous for a moment.

"You would not lie to me, girl."

"You know I would not, captain."

"The pocket is empty! And Norgan is taking to Sacramento the message which was not to have been delivered till after my death!"

Opal gave utterance to a low cry of astonishment.

"He may have thought you dead," she said, recovering. "I am sure he did, for the note he left in his cabin told me that he had left you, as he believed, murdered in 'the office.' Norgan is faithful, captain."

The beauty of Satan City spoke the last words in a voice that brought a glow to her cheeks, which Boss Nevada caught and greeted with a smile.

"We think well of Norgan," he rejoined. "He thought me dead, and took the message. But how did he know it was there?"

"I don't know," answered Opal, shaking her head.

He turned his head and looked at the dull-brown logs of the cabin, as if he was trying to see beyond them where a man on a splendid horse was riding south like the wind.

Opal said nothing to disturb him, but all at once his bands were jerked away from hers as if it had suddenly changed to a serpent's head, and when he turned his face his lips were twitching nervously.

"I have summoned the Colonel to the land of mystery before he ought to come!" cried he.

"Not Colonel Bluff, Nevada?"

"Silence! I have sent to Sacramento a message that will betray the secret of No Man's Ground. He will come. All the powers that be cannot hold him back."

"Why, he is wedded to the wheeled chair!" broke from the girl's lips. "He is such a cripple that his servants have to put him to bed when he does not sleep between his wheels, which I am told he often does."

"Yes, yes! He is a child, though he has the arms of a giant and the mind of a philosopher. I know all about the Crippled Crees of California. There is no living person who can impart to me any new information about him; but heavens! what an array of it I could tell them! I say that he will come to No Man's Ground before he should come. He won't come on his wheels either, Opal. He won't be guided over the road by the mute who wheels him about the streets of Sacramento when he wants an airing. He will come in the saddle, with the lines in his own hands."

Opal, falling back again, looked at the speaker as if she believed that the madness had come back; but though he talked fast and with emphasis, he had not the maniacal look he had once worn.

"Send Lolas to me," he suddenly went on. "Next to Norgan, Lolas is the man I can trust."

The girl got up, but hesitated half-way between the cot and the door.

"I recollect that I have seen nothing of Lolas since I sent him down to the secret bonanza to look for you last night," she exclaimed. "He was accompanied by Tiger and Silver Sol."

"But they came back long ago," was the answer. "Send Lolas to me, child."

It was a command that had to be obeyed, and with another look at the mad master of the mines, Opal went away.

"What does he want?" asked the guards who gathered round her the moment she was seen at the door.

"He wants Lolas."

"He isn't in camp."

She looked at the men with a singular expression.

"It is believed that Lolas, Tiger and Silver Sol have taken this occasion to desert," continued the spokesman. "They haven't been seen since last night. Don't you think it looks that way, Opal?"

She did not know what to say.

It would never do to go right back into the shanty and report these suspicions to the man there.

"I can't believe that Lolas has deserted," she remarked, after thinking a moment. "He was one of the trusted. I will look for him awhile. It will do no harm, you know."

In another moment Opal was walking off, never dreaming of the terrible fact that at that very instant three men—the very ones she had just spoken of—were beating the walls of a crypt, and cursing the madman who had buried them alive.

CHAPTER XIX.

GIDEON MAKES A MOVE.

"Do you think he looks very grateful, captain?"

"Dun Duff?"

"Yes."

"He doesn't show his gratitude, but there's no telling how he feels."

Johnny Jumpup looked from Gideon Goldbar at the man who had come out of the shadow of death by reason of Boss Nevada's madness, and studied him silently for several seconds.

Dun Duff leaned against the logs of a cabin and was complacently puffing at a cigar which had remained undisturbed during his imprisonment.

He was an object of study by a little group of men some yards away, though he did not seem to notice it.

With his broad-rimmed hat tilted back on his head and one foot crossed over the other he looked like a man on his own ground and not in a strange camp where he was hated and distrusted.

"He hasn't asked a word about Julius," continued Johnny turning to Gideon. "He doesn't seem to have heard about the fate of his man on the journey up here. His coolness and sphinx-like manners take the wind out o' my sails. But I saw enough of him in Sacramento before we got away. When I overheard the conversation between him and Julius in the bar-room I knew that we were to deal with a cool fellow. Here he is now—as large as life, and yet he doesn't care a whit whether he hangs or slips through the noose—I mean that's the way it looks."

"Did they restore his weapons when they let him out on parole?"

"They played fair with Dun Duff. They gave back everything," answered Johnny Jumpup.

"Gideon eyed the freed sport a little while.

"I'm going to talk to him," said he."

"Play it cool, captain. If he suspects—"

"Leave that to me, Johnny."

"Look at his hands."

"What about them?"

"See how soft they appear. He's one o' those fellows who have a velvet grip, but who can kill with that grip all the same."

"Like the Queen of Darkness, eh?"

Johnny Jumpup gave an involuntary shudder.

"No, not quite like her. There's no grip just like hers. Dun Duff has claws under his velvet, and the time is likely to come when he will use them."

"Here, Johnny?"

"I can say that. A good deal hinges on Boss Nevada."

Gideon Goldbar left the cabin from whose window he had watched the quiet smoker against the shanty.

Dun Duff saw him the instant the door opened, but he did not seem to take more than passing notice of him.

"Claws under the velvet. Look out!" rung in the ears of Mona's sleuth as the door shut, and he walked toward the man on parole.

It was the first time these two men, so well matched physically, had stood fairly face to face in Satan City.

Fate seemed to have brought them together, but if the truth had been known then fate would not have received all the credit.

Did Dun Duff know that he was being approached by a man who had followed him from Sacramento with as determined a purpose as ever actuated a trailer of human prey? Was he aware that Gideon Goldbar was Captain Velvet whose triumphs were common talk over the length and breadth of the wild West and the Pacific coast?

If he was a man holding a secret worth millions he was running a foolish risk among the banded men of No Man's Ground, and the gold-tramps of California.

Perhaps the custody of the secret had brought him to Satan City, or he may have sought the wild out-of-the-way place to escape the trailer. Who could tell?

He smoked with no traces of excitement as Gideon Goldbar came up, and as the detective stopped in front of him he touched his hat brim looking Dun Duff pleasantly in the eye.

"Captain Duff?" said Gideon.

"Captain Goldbar?" was the response.

"I am glad to see you," continued the late prisoner holding out his hand which the detective found to agree with Johnny Jumpup's estimate "as soft as velvet."

"They did not hold you long," observed Gideon.

"Hold me? Pish! They knew they could not. But won't you go in?"

Dun Duff pushed open the door at his elbow and Gideon saw the outlines of two stools and a table.

Acknowledging the invitation with a bow he stepped inside and was followed by the man on whose trail he was.

"What do they say?" asked the voice of Dun Duff, as he shut the door and leaned against the table folding his arm coolly.

"There's a diversity of opinion."

"Ah! As if all those fools out there could be of one mind," was the laughing rejoinder. "Do they still cling to the idea that I did it?"

"The Goths are inclined to think so."

"What do you think?"

Gideon smiled.

"That's pretty pointed, Captain Duff?"

"I'm a bluff fellow."

"Well, then, I don't agree with the Goths."

"No?"

"It is true."

"I took you for a fair-minded gentleman and I see that I am not mistaken."

He studied Gideon for a moment as he could see him in the evening light which came in at the window through four panes of glass which had not been washed for many a day.

"Why, I never saw Nicol Macbeth—I believe that was his name—till I looked at him lying dead under the tree out there. Why would I kill him? I did not invade No Man's Ground to take human life unless—"

He paused and let a smile appear at the corners of his mouth.

"Unless they press Dun Duff too far," he finished.

Beside the smile there was a malicious twinkle in his eye which Gideon Goldbar could not help seeing while he looked at him from the wooden stool.

"They say that they cannot try a man without the prosecuting witness, and that person, in your case, is Captain Nevada," resumed the detective.

"Boss Nevada, the lunatic, eh?"

"Yes."

"They get out of a foolish snap in that manner do they?" ejaculated Duff. "I like to see them wriggle," and he let out one of his sleek laughs again. "See here, Captain Goldbar. You've traveled some?"

"A trifle," bowed Gideon.

"Then, you know mankind pretty well. It's the same the world over. Out yonder stand a lot of fellows who would like to play tiger, but

who haven't the courage of a cat. I could walk into Shasta Sam's and call 'em all up at my expense. Pish!" it was his old word again and he seemed to take great delight in pronouncing it. "The pards of Satan City are no better no braver than the pards of Rotten Gulch or Bob-tail Bluffs. As to the Goths—those fifty tramps who came in expecting to get rich at one swoop in No Man's Ground—there isn't one man o' nerve among the whole lot. Their time was when Boss Nevada, standing by the corpse of their pard Macbeth, covered me dramatically with his finger and said: 'There's the man! They lost their chance when they let it pass."

"Men lose their heads in a moment," remarked Gideon, who was impressed by the coolness—it could not be called bluster—of this remarkable man.

"Yes, and some of them are thinking that I ought to thank them for carrying my head on my shoulders at this moment. I thank nobody. At no time was I in the shadow of the noose. But let us talk. How is Boss Nevada?"

"He was asleep awhile ago."

"Mad yet, eh?"

"Mad, but apparently a trifle better."

"I have heard that he raves about a Queen of Darkness."

"He does."

"Are his sentences connected?"

"No."

Dun Duff seemed to reflect for a moment.

"I haven't been inquisitive for that isn't my nature," he went on. "The man who kept me company in the cabin before they let me out on 'parole' as they call it, mentioned that Captain Nevada is absolute here. Do you know anything about that?"

"I believe he is alcalde, master, and captain, all in one."

"Where did he come from?"

The detective was forced to shake his head in the negative.

"Do s he look like a man from the far South?"

"I never studied him closely."

"Does he strike you as being a native Californian?"

"Not quite that."

"Right you are, Captain Goldbar," and Dun Duff showed his teeth in a grin. "This man Nevada is not a Californian. I say for him that he is the very person to lord it over a lot of men like the citizens of No Man's Ground."

"Then you know something about him?"

The folded arms parted and dropped to Dun Duff's sides.

"I know of him," he answered slowly. "I know of a good many men. Begging your pardon, I may say that I have heard of Gideon Goldbar before to-night."

It was next to impossible for the detective not to start at this announcement.

"That is not strange," he replied in light vein.

"Men of our stamp, Captain Duff, could hardly keep off of each other's path all our lives."

It was well said and produced a little laugh by the man who listened.

"Of our stamp? That will do," smiled Duff. "Yes, Captain Goldbar, you have crossed my path. Twice."

"Twice?" was the echo.

"You have forgotten. Five years ago a man lost a stirrup in Monte Cristo Canyon, and one year later, to the very day almost, the same gentleman had it restored to him."

The detective was almost staring at the man who thought he was refreshing his memory.

"Is it not so, Captain Goldbar?"

"It is true, but, are you the person who found and restored the stirrup?"

"One of my men found it. I sent it back. You see a man needs a good memory sometimes, and especially in this country. Will you go over to Sam's with me? I want to see these Goths and Vandals by lamplight."

"I did not j in you for that, but—"

"I will not insist. Keep me company here and let the gold scum of No Man's Ground fight it out among themselves."

Which was done.

What passed thereafter between the two men thus brought face to face to become the principal actors in a wild drama in the land of gold is of no interest to the reader.

An hour passed before Gideon Goldbar took his leave.

"To-morrow the Goths are to be shown No Man's Ground as the guests of Satan City," observed Dun Duff as they were about to separate. "I wonder if there is among them one fool enough to think that it will be a square deal."

The detective touched his hat again and walked away. If he could have looked through the door, he would have seen Dun Duff make a mock obeisance nearly to the floor and perhaps heard these words:

"I'm an old bird, captain. Hal hal hal!"

CHAPTER XX.

DEATH LOTS.

OPAL was compelled to report that Lola could not be found. She did not inform the mad boss that the prevailing opinion was that he with Tiger and Silver Sol had grown tired

of serving Colonel Bluff and had quietly deserted.

Nobody thought of the crypt whose iron door was shut and immovable; if they had it would not have been suspected that the three men were beyond it.

Boss Nevada heard the girl's report with more calmness than she looked for.

"When Lolas comes, remember, I want to see him," said he, and then he went off on something else.

When the day came for the Gold Goths to be shown over the immediate vicinity of Satan City—it was the day after Gideon Goldbar's visit to Dun Duff—there was considerable excitement in camp.

The piloting committee consisted of six of the most prominent miners.

The detective and Dun Duff were asked to join the crowd, which invitation was accepted by both.

It had been resolved, as the reader doubtless imagines, that the Goths should see nothing indicative of the presence of gold in paying quantities on No Man's Ground.

The rumor which had gone out of a fabulous bonanza was to be proved false, and the Goths were expected to fold their tents and continue their tramp.

To all outward appearances the investigation was honestly conducted.

The Goths were taken first to one place then to another.

They were shown pockets which had been worked, and shafts that bore the marks of mining-tools.

They were allowed to stop and prospect a little, which they eagerly did, but the looks of disgust that overspread their faces were truthful indexes to their opinions.

Their guides took them into the mine which had been visited by the detective and Johnny Jumpup, and where the redoubtable Johnny had been terribly choked by the mysterious woman.

Not a gold streak was found.

More than once Gideon Goldbar stole covert glances at Dun Duff.

He saw that the cool head had seen through the object of the search.

There was a quiet smile of suspicion at Duff's lips, and when the guides would conduct the party to new fields of barrenness the smile would broaden.

In truth, he was "an old bird"—too old to be caught by chaff of that sort.

These proceedings took up one-half of the day.

When the crowd came back to Shasta Sam's, dusty, hungry and tired, a good deal of emphatic language was indulged in, and liquor disappeared with astonishing rapidity.

There was among the Goths a disposition to "move on."

A private caucus was held and the progressive party carried its point.

Those who wanted to go back, were to go; the others had started out for gold, and they did not intend to stop short of a bonanza.

If they had but known the hidden secrets of No Man's Ground, not a single one would have voted to move on.

If they could have prospected for themselves, without being taken where the six guides wanted them to go, and nowhere else, the trip of discovery might have had a different ending.

But it was not to be so.

"We go away, but we leave Dun Duff scot-free. We turn our backs on Satan City, but we are leaving Pard Macbeth unavenged on the mountain."

These sentences from a bronzed giant who spat his words out with energy and bitterness, had an instant effect on the caucus.

Not that the dead man had been a favorite, for he had not, but the hot-heads wanted blood. They had been lured to No Man's Ground by a silly rumor, and they wanted to get even with somebody for it.

"We ought to bring that man to trial. Burke is right," answered another Goth, nodding toward the man who had spoken.

"But the code here, gentlemen," observed a quiet man in a corner.

"The code be hanged!"

For all this they did fear the laws of Shasta Land.

"We can do this," broke out the giant again. "We can fix Dun Duff and his pard, too, for that matter, as a parting shot. I move that we cast lots for the man."

"For what man, Burke?"

"Ha! don't you know? You have roughed it from camp to camp, from failure to success, and back again. The man who is drawn does the work, with Gothdom at his back. Eh?"

"Go ahead!" cried a dozen eager fellows.

"I want a majority vote first. Hands up."

Instantly the air was full of swarthy hands, and Burke the miner silently counted them with his two dark eyes.

"The proposition is carried," he announced. "I go out into the Square and gather some stones, one for each man. They lie thick yonder, as you have noticed, some black, others strangely white. All I secure shall be white but one. They will be placed in my hat, one of us

will be blindfolded and stationed by the till. As each man comes up the blindfolded pard will draw a stone and the man shall take it without showing it to his companions. The person getting the black stone in this manner will be Dun Duff's executioner. Not in the dark, mind you—not like Macbeth was killed, but open and above board, with Gothdom at his back!"

This speech was silently assented to, and Burke, the Gold Goth, went out from the double cabin where the caucus was held and began to pick up stones where they lay thick.

He was seen by numbers of Satan City's citizens, but not one guessed the tragedy which was to follow the gathering of the pebbles.

The Goth came back with the stones in his pocket.

Placing his hat on the table in the middle of the large room, he emptied his find therein and looked at the crowd.

"Who shall wear the blindfold?" he asked.

"You," answered some one.

"All right," smiled the giant. "Tie me up," and taking the handkerchief he wore round his neck, he offered it for the intended purpose.

In a minute he stood before the table completely blindfolded, and then he began calling the Goths by name, one by one, and slowly.

As each man was called he advanced and held his hand palm downward over the hat whose broad brim was turned up forming a deep bowl.

Burke would thrust his hand into the hat, pick up one of the stones and bring it up to the grasp waiting for it at the rim.

In this manner all the pebbles were drawn but one, which remained for the blindfolded Goth.

He took it with a smile, and holding tightly in one hand removed the handkerchief with the other.

"The black stone is held by some one," he said to the crowd. "Let the holder shrink not. He has Gothdom at his back. We can't afford to tarry here till a crazy man gets back his mind, which may be never. We would be cowards to go away with Macbeth on the mountain in a bloody grave and unavenged. Fortune would never smile on us, and we would go back, if we ever went back at all, beggars!"

"What is the plan, Burke?"

The men seemed to look upon the giant as their captain.

"I will state it briefly. To-night, say at eight, we assemble in the Square to take leave of Satan City. We want everybody there, for we expect never to return. The man whom we hate will be drawn thither by the event. Dun Duff could not remain away. His tall figure will be seen against all others, and near by, perchance, will stand the man who thinks he is playing it cunning by not appearing to be his pard. Gentlemen, as the good-by is spoken, the man who has drawn the black stone throws up his hand, and Dun Duff drops in his tracks—dead! You understand—shot through the head. Instantly the startled pards of No Man's Ground are covered by the revolvers of Gothdom. If Gideon Goldbar makes a move he follows Dun Duff. Such shall be our leave-taking. In such a manner will we turn our backs on Satan City, leaving behind us a fractured code but an avenged comrade."

The men looked at the speaker and approved his plan.

There were those in the crowd who would have suggested another if they had been called upon; but as they were not they did not speak.

It was generally believed by the Goths that the men of No Man's Ground would not resist this summary vengeance, even though it broke the much-talked-of code.

The law of retribution was recognized in every mining-camp throughout California. It overruled courts and legal verdicts, building for itself a statute that could not be suppressed nor set aside.

During this time not one man had looked at the stone taken from the hat for him.

Some had transferred them to their pockets, while others still held them in their hands.

"Remember, gentlemen, there is to be no backing out," admonished Burke, addressing the entire crowd as he swept it with his eye. "Satan City must know that we go at eight, that we take leave rather ceremoniously on the Plaza, but not one hint, mind you, that we intend to leave one dead man—mebbe two—behind!"

The Goths filed out of the cabin till it was empty.

In the light they separated, and each man looked at his stone.

All smiled and looked relieved—all but one.

Over this man's face fell a shadow of sternness. The lips met firmly as if behind a resolute sentence, and the right hand that dropped at his side closed with a clinch on the black stone there!

He seemed to wonder if his comrades suspected that he had drawn the fatal lot. But this did not last more than a second.

He walked away with steady step, crossed the threshold of Shasta Sam's den and called for liquor.

As he held up his glass he threw a look across

the counter at the rubicund barkeeper in his shirtsleeves and laughed.

"We're goin' to continue the wild-goose chase to-night, Sam. Ain't you glad to get rid of us paupers?"

"Not by a long shot. Paupers?" cried Shasta Sam. "I wish I had paupers like you for customers the year round. You ar' goin' away, you say?"

"Yes."

"When?"

"To-night at eight. We take formal leave o' No Man's Ground on the Plaza. No tears and no regrets. You will come out, Sam?"

"If I can get away."

"You can, for you'll have nobody here."

The head was thrown back and the fiery whisky of Satan City shot down the Goth's throat.

Then he set the glass down with emphasis and walked out, watched by the barkeeper till his figure was lost.

"My head ag'in' an empty buzz-juice bar'l that thar goes the coolest member o' the whole gang," observed Sam, as he turned to take a drink himself.

CHAPTER XXI.

NEMESIS IN THE SADDLE.

WOULD night never come?"

As the long afternoon dragged toward a close the pards of No Man's Ground learned to a man that there was to be an exodus at eight o'clock.

They saw the gold tramps saddle their horses, which had had a good rest, and the various utensils of a prospector's kit were fastened to the steeds.

Satan City rejoiced secretly that its unwelcome guests were about to pull up stakes and move on. The Goths seemed equally pleased, for they had declared that they were glad to get out of a country where there was nothing but bothersome codes; no gold at all.

"I wish Dun Duff would make up his mind to go with the banded tramps!" exclaimed Opal, while she stood at the window of her cabin and saw the preparations for departure that were going on in the Square. "Mona's sleuth tells me that Dun Duff's mission to No Man's Ground means more than the pards dream of. He came all the way from Sacramento alone. He had a friend there—a man called Julius, but I am told that master and man will never meet again in this life. Julius started north with the Goths, but he quarreled with Nicol Macbeth, now dead, and was disposed of by a hurriedly organized Vigilance Committee. That is why Dun Duff came here alone. Does he linger for Julius? Is he waiting for the man whose bones were picked by the vultures days and days ago? I wonder where Norgan is!"

Of late nearly all of the girl's thoughts had ended with this question.

"I wonder where Norgan is now?" she would repeat.

The men who were getting ready for departure glanced often at the west.

They saw the sun drop reluctantly behind the mountain cone, and then the shadows mingled and became one.

More than one man knew who had drawn white stones from the hat in the shanty, but the secret of the black pebble was locked in a single bosom.

Though the Gold Goths conversed freely they did not mention the death lottery to one another.

They inspected the traps they had brought to Satan City, as if they had resolved that they would take everything away.

Opal took much interest in their proceedings.

She knew that at eight o'clock they would spring to saddle and depart, but she did not know the rest.

After sundown she opened the door and stood in it some time.

There were lights on the Square and here and there could be seen moving figures of men.

"What would Boss Nevada think if he could see this?" the young girl asked herself.

"How is the captain now, miss?"

It was most singular that this question should be spoken at her elbow just after her thought about the mad Boss of the camp, and Opal found a handsome man at her side.

"You?" she cried. "Pardon me. I did not expect you here. Are you going away, too?"

"With those men?" laughed the man looking toward the Square. "Why would I go with them after what has taken place?"

Opal could not suppress a smile though his reply was the most natural one in the world.

"No, when I go it will not be with those fellows!" rejoined Dun Duff, and his emphasis seemed to call forth another sentence—"It may be after them."

She looked into the cool dark eyes of the mysterious man a moment like a person spell-bound. He leaned against the cabin his elbow touching the logs and his hat tilted back far enough to display his deep forehead.

"Are they really going?" asked Opal.

"They say they are and it looks like it," added Dun. "But you have forgotten my little inquiry about the captain."

"Captain Nevada is a little better. Do you ask because you are interested?"

"You mean because I am liable to be tried when his mind comes back. No, I do not ask on that account. I don't care for that. He is better? I am glad of it."

There was honest if not secret rejoicing in Dun Duff's tones.

"What brought it on?—the Queen of darkness, eh?"

"Peruaps."

"Do you think she is flesh and blood, miss?"

"I do, for I don't believe in the supernatural," Opal hastened to say.

"Neither do I," laughed the man. "I've heard of haunted mines all my life, but I've never found one yet. They don't exist save in diseased imaginations or the designs of men with a motif. If Captain Nevada saw a queen of darkness he saw flesh and blood. If he was touched and made mad he was touched, by fingers of flesh. We don't believe in hobgoblins—you and I, miss! I—"

Dun Duff went no further for a figure loomed up before them, and then Opal was asked if she could come down to Boss Nevada's cabin a few moments.

Dun Duff stepped back.

"Come back in time to see the mounted tramps off," he said to her as her graceful figure glided away. "They go at eight from beneath the tree yonder—Mark Moline's gallows."

"I will see them go, Captain Duff," she sent back over her shoulder, and the marked man of No Man's Ground walked slowly toward the square though he did not invade it, turning aside before he got there.

Opal went straight to Boss Nevada's shanty. She looked in at the window before she lifted the latch, and saw the well-known physique of the Shasta captain outlined against the cabin wall.

There was a subdued light in his eyes when she entered, and when he saw her he leaned forward and greeted her with a pleasant cry.

"You are the angel of light as the other is one of darkness," he observed, with no traces of strangeness in his tones. "Come here, Opal. I am no longer tied like a tiger, but I could go out and down to the Plaza without hindrance."

She was surprised to see that he was entirely free, and when she went up to him he took her hands and drew her still closer.

"Now," thought the girl, "if he should take me for the Queen of Darkness, in a fit of madness, my life would not be worth a blade of mountain grass."

"I know all that is going on," continued Boss Nevada. "The Goths are going away. They spring to saddle at eight o'clock, and we shall see them no more forever. But I did not send for you to tell you this. I have something for you here."

He released her and crossed the room to the bedstead to which he had lately been lashed.

He stooped over the cot and ran his hands under the pillow.

When he came back he held a small parcel, sealed with red wax and wrapped with buckskin cord.

"There are two trails between Sacramento and Satan City," he resumed, stopping in front of the wondering girl and balancing the parcel on his fingers. "Two main trails, I mean. One man can't take both of them at once. I am going down one."

"You, Captain Nevada?" cried Opal.

"I."

"But—"

"I have my old head again," and he broke into a chuckling laugh. "Something has happened that was not to happen yet. She brought it about. Norgan is not to blame. I confide this parcel to you, girl. If I come back, you will surrender it; if he comes, you will give it to him."

"To Norgan, captain?"

"No, to Colonel Bluff!"

The beauty of Satan City recoiled to the wall.

"It is impossible for that man, crippled as he is, to come here!" she exclaimed. "Why, he can't leave his chair! He is—"

"The message that Norgan carries would bring the dead to life!" broke in Boss Nevada. "By Jupiter! I believe if Colonel Bluff was made of stone he would spring to saddle and ride this way. I go toward Sacramento. I may go all the way. I may meet him coming up, or I may miss him. There is no telling which trail he will take; but he will come. I tell you he will come!"

Opal took the parcel tied and sealed, without knowing what she was doing.

"When do you go, captain?"

"While the Goths are taking leave of Satan City. I can get away best then for the boys will all be there."

He went to the door and looked out.

"The crowd has gathered," he resumed. "The hour has come, Opal. Keep the parcel for me or for him."

He took his hat from a wooden peg driven into one of the logs, buckled about him a belt containing two revolvers, and held out his hand.

"Must this be?" asked the bewildered girl.

"All earth could not prevent. Opal, when he

comes you will know something. You are one day, if justice is done, to be the Gold Queen of the Pacific."

"I don't care for that. You dare not tell me the secret now, Captain Nevada."

"That is true. I dare not..."

He said no more, but went out leaving the girl to wonder if she were really awake, and not the victim of some strange dream.

Of course she could not follow him though she went to the door herself.

He was already gone and the sound of his heavy tread had died away.

"What is this secret and this mystery?" cried Opal.

"Does Mona's sleuth-hound know of it? Gone to intercept Colonel Bluff. That is Captain Nevada's mission. But can the California Croesus ride?"

After all, his confinement to the wheel-chair may have been a sham. I must wait. I must watch. But they seem to be waiting for me down yonder. Am I the only one not there? It must be so."

She shut the shanty door carefully behind her, and went toward the Square.

One corner of it was comfortably filled.

Opal first saw a lot of men on horseback.

They were the Gold Goths and the heads of their steeds, every one, were turned one way.

The girl drew alongside some of the pards of No Man's Ground, and when she was seen they made way for her and she passed to the front.

"Gentlemen, we find nothing hyer, therefore we move on to other fields!" said a loud voice, and Opal at once saw the giant speaker as he sat astride one of the foremost horses. "We're a company o' rollin' stones, an' we've been rollin' all our lives with no moss to show for our industry. In behalf of all the Goths in your presence, as well as the one on the mountain yonder, I thank you for your courtesies. We may meet again; we may part to-night forever. You have your code, we have ours. Blood has been shed, and it has dried without hindrance. When your crazy alcalde gets his reason, if he ever does, you will look up your laws. We carry our code inscribed on the barrels of our revolvers! Pards of No Man's Ground, fate and luck have united to make me executioner."

During one-half of this speech the speaker's right hand rested on his hip.

With the last word it was jerked away, and every man saw that it held a revolver.

The men of No Man's Ground seemed too astonished to stir. Opal broke the strange silence with a cry. She turned to see who was covered by the Goth's six-shooter, when the man in the saddle fired straight into the crowd before him!

CHAPTER XXII.

SOME PLAIN WORDS.

THE SECRECY THAT ENVELOPED THE HOLDER OF THE BLACK STONE WAS OUT.

He was Burke himself, the man who, blindfolded, had taken the lots from the hat for his companions, and the last stone, which had fallen to him, had proved to be the fatal one.

The drawing of the revolver and the shooting had taken up barely an instant of time.

As a matter of course, his farewell led up to startling action, but the men who had listened were not prepared for what followed.

At the crack of the weapon a tall man in front of the mounted Nemesis staggered against the person behind him, and twenty men had cried:

"Dun Duff!"

A clicking of revolver-locks followed the shot, and it was seen that every Goth held above the saddle a cocked six-shooter.

"Gentlemen, our code is to leave no pard unavenged," spoke Burke, the giant. "According to agreement, you see Gothdom at my back. We harbor no ill feeling against the men of No Man's Ground. It is code against code; that is all. Shall we go in peace, our work of vengeance done, or shall we fight our brethren of the Gold Land?"

The pards of Satan City looked at one another, and then at the mounted phalanx behind the deadly barrels.

"Go," said some one, and the word went from mouth to mouth, till almost every man in front of the Goths had spoken.

Not until then did a single weapon drop, and then the horses were turned, and the bonanza-hunters of California moved off.

Opal had turned quick enough after the shot to see some of its immediate effects.

Dun Duff was still in the arms of the two men who had caught him and were holding him from the ground.

In another moment she was at his side.

"Dead?" cried the young girl. "Was it a fatal shot?"

"I guess Dun Duff's done for. Shot through the head by the coolest hand in the gang. I said I'd bet my brains ag'in' an empty bug-jar bar'l that he was a cool one."

The speaker was Shasta Sam of the mountain saloon.

"What do you think?"

Opal addressed her second question to a man who had just examined the man lying on the ground with his hat for a pillow.

"Worth two dead men yet, miss, was the reply.

"Then, there is hope?"

"Plenty of it. Dun Duff is marked for life, and his beauty will be spoiled, for the Goth's bullet plowed a furrow across his forehead as he turned his head as the desperado touched the trigger. He is mine yet!"

He spoke the last sentence in a whisper leaning slightly toward Opal as he did so, and then with another look at the man on the ground walked away.

It was soon known that by a miracle Dun Duff had escaped with a crimson line across his forehead.

Escaped to play out the game that had brought him to No Man's Ground. Escaped to take vengeance some day for the shot fired from the saddle.

The Goths were gone in the belief that Nicol Macbeth had been avenged by the holder of the black stone.

Dun Duff was taken back to his quarters where his head was bandaged and where in a short time he was visited by Gideon Goldbar.

"I call that a piece of cool business," smiled Dun Duff. "You witnessed it, Captain Goldbar?"

"I did."

"After the shot what did the gang do?"

"Rode off quietly."

"They believe that their captain finished me, eh?"

"Undoubtedly."

The hand that rested on the rough table of the cabin shut suddenly.

"They may discover before death calls the roll that they have committed a blunder."

"I think they have, Captain Duff."

"They have left me to be tried when Boss gets his reason again," continued Dun. "When do you think that will be?"

The detective shook his head.

"We will wait and see in what shape he comes back."

"Comes back?" echoed Duff, falling back on his stool. "From where?"

"From the South."

"Boss Nevada?"

"Boss Nevada."

"When did he go South?"

"About the time you were staggering back from the work of the big Goth's revolver."

Dun Duff gave the detective a look which soon became a stare.

He did not ask what had taken the autocrat of No Man's Ground southward, but he was interested, all the same.

"Does the camp know of this?" was the inquiry he made.

"Not all of them. The secret has not yet got abroad. You know it and I with the girl and several others."

"He did not go alone?"

"He went alone."

"Mad, of course!"

"Opal says he seemed in possession of all his faculties."

Dun Duff was silent, but Gideon could see that his thoughts were at work.

Suddenly he looked up, caught the eye of his visitor before it could be dropped or turned away, and held it for a moment.

"Why don't you throw off the mask?" he said, and the words were accompanied by a smile that seemed to lend him a new countenance.

"What mask, Captain Duff?"

"The one you're wearing now."

"I do not understand."

Dun Duff burst into a laugh.

"You did not leave your wits in Sacramento, and you are not the man to lose them on a trip," he continued, breaking off his merriment and settling down to seriousness. "Captain, shall I inform you that I am now addressing a gentleman known in various quarters as Captain Velvet, sleuth and shadow?"

There was no sudden start on the utterance of these words.

Gideon Goldbar sat coolly on his three-legged stool and looked at the man who had spoken them with a tinge of triumph in his tones.

"You see I have not been playing in the dark," resumed Dun Duff, the smile coming back and settling at his lips. "I have not inadvertently been called an old bird—too old to be caught when I have my eyes open. Let me finish," he raised his hand to maintain silence on Gideon's part. "I think I know who set you on the trail which you are treading now. You started from Sacramento, and you left behind a promise that you would find her child. Is that not so?"

"You are right. Go on."

"You are in the employ of a woman who is willing to destroy the world to carry out her ends. Mona can sit in her dark room and hatch more plots than a Guy Fawkes gang. Were I in her place, I would be thinking about the other world and its judgments. What do you think will become of the child she is raising in the atmosphere of hate and vengeance by which she has surrounded herself?"

"I like Velvet, I—"

"Yes; there's not much of the mother in the child—as yet," interrupted Dun Duff. "But there is no telling what will happen if the

guardianship goes on. You know the history of Mona. As her sleuth-hound—she has employed many before you, Captain Velvet—you did not go into the case blindly. I would like to ask you, were it not too much impertinence, if you are to be paid out of the wealth she expects to clutch.

"I would answer you plainly, Captain Duff," and the detective looked squarely at the man before him. "I do not expect to touch a dollar of Vetla's fortune."

"Of Vetla's! Ho! ho!" exclaimed Duff. "What about the other one's bonanza?"

"You mean the one who is lost—the child torn from Mona, the almost blind, years and years ago?"

"Yes."

"If she is found, there will be enough for both."

"I think so. *If she is found!*"

"She has been missing—"

"Eighteen years, three months and—" Duff reflected a moment—"and twelve days."

"You are exact?"

"That is one of my virtues. Lost for eighteen years, and you expect to find her—for the woman who talks of nothing but vengeance and justice."

Dun Duff left his seat and leaned against the table. Folding his arms upon his chest he looked down at the man who regarded him complacently.

"Why didn't you play your first hand in Sacramento?" continued Duff. "I cannot think that a man who has played go-as-you-please sleuth as long as you have would leave the city without calling on the person who ought to know something. Or did you follow me to No Man's Ground?"

The last sentence sounded like a challenge.

There was nothing between the two men but a little space.

Captain Velvet rose and stood at one end of the table and so near Dun Duff that a hand put forward would have touched him.

"My profession is the following of men," he spoke coolly. "I was on trails when my stirrup was found and restored. I am Mona's sleuth now. The woman has been unfortunate. Her last hound was a Mexican who must have deserted her cause for he never made a report."

"The man is dead," came over the lip that barely moved.

"Hah! you seem to know."

"It was one of the things I can't forget. The man's name was Vargas. I wish you had asked Boss Nevada about him before his madness took him to Sacramento. But never mind the Mexican shadow, Captain Velvet. You were saying that Mona has been unfortunate. Do you mean her partial blindness?"

"Captain Duff is aware of what I mean," was the response. "You ask if I have followed you? Does it look thus to you after what has happened lately?"

"It does."

"Then know that I am here because Mona sent me and because you are where you are tonight."

Eye met eye midway in the little space that separated the detective and his prey.

The lamp burning on the table in a few inches of Gideon Goldbar's left hand threw up its light on the faces of both.

"I like a frank man. By Jove! I delight in him," exclaimed Dun Duff. "You shall have an equal frankness for answer. I am playing my own game for my own ends, no matter what they be. They cross the designs of this woman who sits in darkness and sends out sleuth after sleuth, waiting for her enemies to be dragged bound into her presence. I know Mona the Mad. Captain Velvet, you should have seen the man of the chair before you left Sacramento. You should have taken Colonel Bluff, the crippled Cœrus of California, to the abode of this vengeance-hunter whether he wanted to go or not. But you follow me. You dog my steps to No Man's Ground. You shadow Dun Duff instead of Colonel Bluff. What secret do I carry that I must be hunted thus?"

"The secret Mona wants. You know who took the child—you know what has become of the third piece of the dagger. Colonel Bluff has the point, Mona the blade, and Julius got the hilt at the pawnshop of Marconi in Sacramento. And my mission is to fit the three pieces together in the interests of justice!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

NORGAN KEEPS HIS WORD.

"At last, old fellow! Many's the horse I've straddled in my time, but never one like you. By Jove! I believe I could turn you back from the edge of Sacramento where I am, and go to the mountain stable as swiftly as I've come down here."

It was getting night over the capital of the Golden State, and the roads leading thereto, running in every direction, like spokes from a hub, were losing themselves in dense shadows as it were.

The man who addressed the foregoing words to a well-limbed black horse had just entered Sacramento by one of these ways.

He showed more signs of fatigue than did the

animal that carried him, and while he spoke, he patted the hot neck and ran his fingers through the long mane.

Ahead of him were the myriad lights of the city. Far behind were the fewer lamps of Satan City, for the rider was Norgan, the assayer of No Man's Ground.

He had reached the end of his journey.

Boss Nevada's favorite horse had carried him over the mountain-trail. He had swung through the canyons at a wild gallop, and had threaded the mazes of wood and valley with the keen eye of a thorough scout.

It had been a long, hard ride, for what?

To place in the hands of a cripple a sealed packet taken from a man supposed to be dead—killed by some unknown terror, in a secret mine on No Man's Ground.

Norgan passed on into Sacramento and the lights seemed to come nearer and grow more plentiful.

Nobody was lying in wait for him, for no one could have known that he was on the way.

Sacramento was not unknown to Norgan.

He rode up one street and down another, as if he knew where he was going.

At last he looked at a lot of trees that almost hid even in the daytime the best-known house in the city.

"The end of the spin!" ejaculated Norgan. "I begin to feel that I have executed my trust, but of course it will not be fully carried out till I have placed the treasure in his hands."

He rode up to the foremost trees and dismounted.

Then he placed one hand under his coat as if to make sure that he had not lost the parcel sealed with crimson wax, smiled to himself, and went up the walk between the trees.

In a few seconds the home of Colonel Bluff loomed between him and the few stars that seemed to hang like balls of fire in the depths of night.

"My first visit to the Cœrus of the chair," muttered Norgan. "And I would not be here now if a dead man had not sent me."

He went up to the door and found the modern knocker, which he jerked with a good deal of impatience.

It was an hour when Colonel Bluff expected no visitors, and Norgan learned this to his chagrin, for he had to ring again and again before he heard the slightest signs of life about the house.

A key turned in the lock at last, and the messenger from No Man's Ground looked into two shining eyes set in the almost expressionless face of a strange woman.

"Nina, the mute, I know," thought the assayer, and then he touched his hat and asked whether Colonel Bluff was at home.

A close scrutiny was the only reply he got, but it was evident that the woman understood him.

To his surprise she stepped back and held the door open in silent invitation for him to enter.

Had she guessed in her shrewdness—Nina, the dumb, was shrewd—that he had come from Satan's City?

Norgan was taken through the same passages once trod by our old acquaintance Johnny Jumprup, and Nina paused at length and pointed toward a closed door.

After this she vanished before Norgan could ask if the man of the chair was alone, and he had naught to do but to go ahead.

Emboldened by his success, the chemist of No Man's Ground turned the knob and pushed the door open.

He saw before him a room pervaded by a soft light which fell stronger on a table than elsewhere, and stepping inside he found himself in an apartment with another.

This person occupied a chair with two high wheels which rose above the arms. The chair was drawn close to the table, and the man was drawing circles in red ink on a map which lay in the lamplight.

Of course Norgan saw before him the Crippled Cœrus of California.

His entrance had not disturbed the man at the table, and struck by the scene he stood several minutes a few inches beyond the door.

At length he grew tired of this and went forward, purposely making a little noise as he did so.

He had not reached the table when he saw an upturned face and met a pair of penetrating eyes fixed upon him.

"Well," said Colonel Bluff, taking in the physical man at a glance, "what is it, my man?"

Norgan, by this time, standing with his hat off, drew still nearer, and the man of the chair gave a slight start.

"You've got mountain grime on your clothes!" he cried.

"I think I ought to have it there."

Another look.

"You are from the camp?"

"I am."

"Who are you?"

"I am Norgan."

"The assayer! I see. Take a chair. No, stand where you are if you are not tired."

"I am not tired," rejoined Norgan, keeping his place.

"Well, what is the news up there?" asked the crippled nabob, and at the same time one of his hands covered the last circle on the map, whether by design or accident Norgan could not tell.

"I think I have something that will answer that," was the response.

The messenger from Shasta Land put his hand in his bosom and brought forth the message.

At sight of it—the red wax and the ribbon—Colonel Bluff's eyes seemed to catch fire, and a tremor passed over his frame.

As Norgan extended the packet the man drew back in his chair and looked from it to the messenger.

"First," cried he, with a gesture of avoidance, "do you know that that parcel was not to be delivered till after a certain person's death?"

"I do. That person is dead," replied Norgan.

He got a strange look from the eyes before him, and the hand that stole forward to take the message fell back again.

"In the second place, do you know that if the seal of that parcel has been broken, you are liable never to leave this house alive?"

"I know that, too," said Norgan, promptly. "The seal will speak for itself. My duty will not be done till you have taken the message. Will you take it?"

The hand that resembled a serpent's head in its movements came forward again.

This time it took the packet from Norgan's hand.

The messenger let out a sigh of relief.

To his surprise the man in the chair laid the parcel on the table, and, strangely enough, it fell within the red circle on the map.

"You will find a door at the end of the hall to the right," Colonel Bluff went on. "Beyond it are refreshments. If you will go thither and make yourself at home, I will call you by and by."

The assayer wanted nothing better than this.

The last few hours of the long ride had been very trying, and he was ready to fly to a glass of stimulating wine and something more solid.

Touching his hat again to Colonel Bluff, he withdrew, and went down the hallway beyond the room.

"Dead! And the sealed secret has come!" exclaimed the cripple of the chair, when he was alone, and his hand picked up the packet, which he began to examine very closely.

He turned it over and over, and his eyes lost their gleam and caught it again several times.

At length he held the waxen seal near the lamp till the heat softened it, when he began to disengage the ribbons with eager fingers.

The second covering of the precious contents of the packet was a thin oiled skin of some kind. It was wrapped with silk thread, which was speedily unwound.

All at once the paper inside was seen.

It was carefully folded square and no longer white.

Colonel Bluff paused here and looked at it some time, as if he feared to go to the end.

"Pish! I'm a man. Why not?" he cried aloud. "I haven't played all my cool hands to stop at a paper. He is dead, Norgan says, and this is why the message is here."

He laughed at the end of the sentence, caught the folded packet with a firmer clutch and wrenched it open.

A moment after, Colonel Bluff's eyes were fixed on the few words of writing he was holding under the lamp, and while they mastered them his teeth met and remained closed like well-matched gladiators.

His color came and went; his mouth twitched nervously at the corners; his hands seemed to lose color as his face did.

He did not speak for five minutes.

"It is well that he is dead!" he exclaimed. "I man who failed as he failed had no right to live. Now I show my hand. Now the man who has been wedded to a chair for years—the Crippled Cœrus of California—becomes the agile silencer of the land of gold!"

He crushed the paper in his hand, and ran his chair a few feet from the table.

Then he caught a green cord that hung from the ceiling along the wall, and jerking it down once, held it there for a second before releasing it.

In a moment there were footsteps in the hall, and a man with the graven countenance of a mute appeared.

"Get out Diabolus," commanded Colonel Bluff.

The man fell back.

If he could have spoken, he would have accompanied the recoil with an exclamation of astonishment.

"You understand me? *The time has come!*" continued the millionaire cripple. "I have received a message that would stir the dead. Bring Diabolus to the door, saddled and bridled, then come up here for me. You have yet to learn who you have been serving. Go!"

Another look with starting eyes, and the mute turned on his heel.

He was down-stairs when Colonel Bluff put his head into the hall and called Norgan.

The messenger had left the door of the front room ajar, and in a second he was in the nabob's chamber.

"Where's your horse?" asked Colonel Bluff.

"Below in front of the house."

"Well, exchange him for one of mine. You are going to No Man's Ground with me."

"With you?" cried Norgan, glancing at the helpless limbs in the chair.

"With me! You will find that I can ride like a Comanche!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

GOING BACK.

THE Colonel's eyes appeared to snap with pleasure while he pronounced the words that astonished the messenger from No Man's Ground.

"I will be ready by the time you have exchanged horses," he went on, still addressing Norgan. "My man has gone down to saddle Diabolus for me," and he turned to the table with a gesture which told the assayer that he wanted to be left alone.

Norgan withdrew.

"What sort of man is he?" he muttered. "Man, did I say? Colonel Bluff must be part devil. His legs are said to be drawn up, and stiff. He can't sit in a saddle, and yet he says he can ride like a Comanche. In Heaven's name what was in that parcel?"

Norgan went down to his horse standing where he had left him among the trees in front of the house, and led him to the stables, which were not hard to find.

As he reached the door, he was confronted by a man who led a horse into the starlight.

"Is this horse for your master?" asked Norgan.

The man nodded.

"How can he ride, crippled as he is?"

The servant put a finger to his lips and shook his head.

"Oh, I've heard of you," smiled the assayer. "You can't speak, like the woman who let me into the house. Very well. I am going with your master, and my servant here is to change horses. Which one shall I take?"

The mute held up four fingers and touched the last one, at the same time throwing a look at the open door.

"The horse in the last stall, eh? All right."

Norgan and his horse disappeared in the stable and the mute went toward the house.

Meantime, Colonel Bluff had summoned Norgan to his room, and had been talking rapidly to her.

"You must keep house till I come back," said he. "That is, of course, if I don't take a notion to stay up there. Let no strangers across the threshold of this house. No living being knows the outcome of this journey. When I say to you 'the time has come,' you will know that I am needed among the mines. I will lock this room when I go out, and it is not to be opened till I come back."

A singular light lit up the woman's eyes, and she talked rapidly with her fingers for a moment.

"I thought you would think of that," laughed Colonel Bluff. "At the end of three months, if no message comes direct from me, you will touch the secret button and go away."

Nina nodded.

"You will find a home in another clime, and I trust it will be a happier one than you've had here. You will never want for anything, for the money I have put aside for you will make you a bonanza queen as they call rich women among the mines. Ah! is that Diabolus at the door?"

Nina crossed the room to the window, looked out a moment and turned to Colonel Bluff with an affirmative smile.

"I will be off in a little while. The man you let in awhile ago is going back with me. He brought the message that puts me once more in the saddle. Did you know him, Nina?"

The woman shook her head.

"It is Norgan the chemist, and assayer of No Man's Ground. He is the youngest one of my people and wholly trustworthy. Now, there comes my man up the steps. Reach me the cords from your drawer."

Nina the dumb stepped aside and took a lot of flat bands from a drawer in a bureau and put them in the nabob's hands. At the same time the door was opened and the man who had been sent after Diabolus made his appearance.

A look passed between the two men, and all at once the servant stooped over Colonel Bluff and lifted him from his chair.

The Californian passed one of his arms round his servant's neck and was carried from the room, Nina following with the cords.

Down stairs the three proceeded, and to the horse that stood beyond the door.

Without any ceremony the servant lifted the Crippled Croesus into the saddle.

"Don't mind the pain it gives me!" laughed the Sacramentan. "My legs haven't been in this fix for many years. Don't handle them with gloves on my account. I want to be tied in the saddle beyond any possibility of falling out. The boys will loosen me when I get up there."

Colonel Bluff glued his lips firmly together

and watched the tying process, every move of which seemed to give him intense pain.

Before it was half through with, Norgan came up leading a horse he had taken from the stables, and looked on with unexpressed wonder.

"I've got to be tied a little on account of these crazy legs of mine!" exclaimed the Californian. "I don't think you'd let me fall out, but, then, I want to take all precautions against it."

The cords which were being manipulated by both Nina and the man, fixed Colonel Bluff as firmly to the animal as ever Mazeppa was fixed to his, and when the last knot had been tied the two stepped back.

"Get up, Captain Norgan. We are off now," said the Colonel. "Nina, remember my last commands. They are to be obeyed to the letter."

The woman made a gesture of obedience with her talking hands, the man stepped back and raised his hat, and the Croesus of California took up the lines.

All this seemed a dream to Norgan, the assayer of No Man's Ground.

He had not been two hours in Sacramento, and here he was going back to the mountains.

As a matter of course he was anxious to know what had occurred since he came away, but still he did not like the double ride without rest.

He wanted to tarry longer in Sacramento. There was a bit of business which he wanted to transact in a certain part of the city somewhat remote from Colonel Bluff's mansion, but the sealed message he had brought down from No Man's Ground had prevented.

He looked at his companion as they rode away from the house, and saw an immobile face, furnished with a pair of strangely eager eyes.

"You know the route," suddenly said Colonel Bluff leaning toward the assayer.

"There are two trails to the mines, Colonel."

"We'll take the shortest."

Nobody noticed that one of the two men who rode toward the suburbs of Sacramento at that certain hour was tied to his steed, therefore the quiverings of Colonel Bluff's limbs were not seen.

"You think this return quick business," remarked the Californian looking at Norgan when they had left the city behind and were fairly on the trail.

"I confess that I do," was the frank answer.

"I pay all damages," laughed the nabob. "You shall lose nothing by this but a little sleep. Now let me ask you a few questions."

Norgan looked ahead, saying:

"Proceed, Colonel."

The man at his side studied him a few seconds before he spoke again.

"What is your full name?" he asked.

"Norgan."

"Is that all?"

"Yes; one does not have to be rich in names in this country."

"Nor rich in gold to get along?"

"No."

"Norgan, is it—simply Norgan?" Colonel Bluff seemed to roll the name over and over on his tongue. "You've been in my service some time."

"Six years."

"Almost to the day."

"Yes, to-morrow will complete the sixth year."

"Do you want to quit the service?"

At this question, Norgan, with a start, looked straight into the face of Bluff the Californian.

"You forget that our oath makes that service endless," said he with a bow.

"I forgot nothing, Captain Norgan. I asked you if you would like to quit my service."

"Right away?"

"When we get to No Man's Ground."

"Do you want me to leave you?"

"No. I merely asked to get at your feelings."

A smile came to Norgan's lips which the sharp eye of the Californian caught before it vanished.

"You are right, Norgan. All of you are in my employ for life. I don't say this to make the bondage seem irksome, nor to cause you to think that you are any one's slave. If I have heard aright, to-night the service of one man has ended."

"You mean Boss Nevada?"

Colonel Bluff inclined his head.

"Did you see him before you came away?"

"I did."

"Where was he?"

"In the office."

"Alone?"

"Yes."

"But still alive?"

"No; he was dead then."

"Dead! and yet told you to fetch me the message?" exclaimed Colonel Bluff.

"A paper clutched in one of his hands put me on the trail. I think he wrote it after he was struck."

"Struck? By what?"

"Death!"

"Aha! Then he had time to leave a message for the first one to find him."

"I found it."

"A better man could not have been first," complimented Colonel Bluff, looking with secret pride at Norgan. "As Captain Nevada is dead, some one will have to step into his shoes."

Norgan looked ahead and said nothing.

"I shall make you master," continued the Sacramentan.

The messenger shook his head and then turned suddenly upon the nabob.

"I'm sorry, but I can't serve," said he, quickly.

"What's to prevent you?" broke out the Californian.

"The oath the master of No Man's Ground must take," was the answer.

"Can't you take it, Norgan?"

"I cannot."

"That mystifies me," exclaimed Colonel Bluff. "It binds the master to have nothing on his mind but my interests. He must see that the secret is kept, that no man reaches the heart of the golden ophir we have discovered, and that he must love no woman while in my service. That is the oath, Captain Norgan. What is there in it to prevent you from taking Boss Nevada's place?"

Morgan flushed to the temples.

"I'll be frank with you, Colonel," he replied.

"The last clause prevents."

"Ha! the woman restriction?" ejaculated Colonel Bluff.

"Yes."

In a moment Norgan had the eyes of his companion fastened upon him in a strange, wondering stare.

"Where is the siren?" he cried, darting toward Norgan as if he was going to clutch his throat.

"She is in Satan City."

"On—my—grounds?" he went on.

"On No Man's Ground."

A slight pause.

"Who is she?"

"Opal."

"Does she love you?"

"I don't know."

Colonel Bluff fell back and shut his teeth.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MAN OF IRON AND STEEL.

The remainder of that ride over the trail leading from Sacramento to Satan City was passed in almost absolute silence.

Where the road was rougher than usual Colonel Bluff's lips would give out some involuntary twitches of pain, but though he often looked at his bonds, and at times seemed to study them he made no outcry.

It was a long ride, but the horses being of good bottom and the men eager to reach their destination it ended at last near the close of an afternoon when a few fleecy clouds and some dark vultures hung over the capital of No Man's Ground.

Norgan nearly held his breath from anxiety as he rode through the last pass beyond which clustered the shanties of Satan City.

He was eager to know what had taken place since his departure.

He had left the Goths in camp thirsting for Dun Duff's blood, and impatiently waiting for the signal for vengeance.

Had that revenge been taken? Had Dun Duff, undoubtedly the evil genius of the colony, been put out of the way, or had he escaped from the shadow of death, his angel of good luck befriending him at the critical moment?

Colonel Bluff had no thoughts of this kind to bother him.

He knew nothing about the Gold Goths, and nothing of Dun Duff's coming, and his arrest.

If he had questioned Norgan concerning the late events on No Man's Ground, he would have received information of a startling nature; but as he had grown so glum after the assayer's refusal to take the oath which would have made him master in Boss Nevada's place, Norgan refused to volunteer any news.

The two men rode into camp almost unnoticed.

"Where do you want to be taken, Colonel?" asked Norgan, breaking in on his companion's survey of the camp.

"To Captain Nevada's. No! the captain is dead. What am I thinking about? Take me to Lolas's shanty."

"I will."

They rode on till Norgan reined in his horse in front of a cabin.

"This is Lolas's," said he, looking at Colonel Bluff. "Pard Lolas is probably at Shasta Sam's. Shall I help you inside while I hunt him up?"

"If you will. I confess that I want these cords loose. Do me the favor, Norgan."

The assayer sprung to the ground and made short work of Colonel Bluff's bonds by cutting them.

Then, being strong, though he did not look it, he helped his comrade from the saddle and carried him into the cabin as though he were a child.

"Put me on the cot, I see Lolas has one," observed the Colonel, and a moment later he was thus placed. "There! I already feel like a new

man. If I only had the legs I once had. But never mind that. Somebody is paying for it. What are you looking at, Norgan?"

The assayer started and flushed at this question.

"Beg your pardon if I was rude!" he stammered. "I will look for Lolas." And out he went before Colonel Bluff could detain him.

"Somebody is paying for it, eh? What does he mean?" muttered Norgan. "He got as dark as a thundercloud when I mentioned Opal. It all appeared new to him. Why, I thought he knew she was here."

Colonel Bluff settled back on the low bedstead and shut his eyes for a few seconds.

"I am here where a few hours ago I did not dream of being. Next to Boss Nevada who betrayed his trust I must look to Lolas. If he plays me false—He dare not! They do not look for their master here; they think he is wedded to the chair in Sacramento, and were I to confront them at Shasta Sam's the whole crowd would run as if from a ghost. But here I am with a hand of iron and a heart of steel. The girl who has caught Norgan will feel that hand before she is much older. What gained her a footing here among the men who willingly made themselves my slaves? Opal, eh? I wonder if she is pretty; but pretty or not, I rule on No Man's Ground as absolutely as in the house in Sacramento."

He shut his hands and fastened his eyes on the door.

By and by, it was not long after Norgan's departure, a step stopped just beyond the portal.

The quick ears of Colonel Bluff caught the sound, and he held his breath.

The cabin had a long shadow now, and in the mountain and about the little graveyard of No Man's Ground it was nearly dark.

In a minute or so the wooden latch gave a slight click, and then the door opened.

Colonel Bluff drew back with a half-suppressed exclamation as his gaze fell upon the figure he saw in the doorway.

A young woman stood before him. Her searching eyes found him almost instantly, and with a stare of surprise, she glided forward and stood at the side of the cot looking down into his eyes.

"You are Colonel Bluff, the master?" said she.

"I am Colonel Bluff and you—"

"I am Opal."

His lips met in a spasm of madness.

"I thought so," came through them for they moved not.

"I have a parcel for you. If he came back I was to deliver it to him; if you came, to you."

"Who is 'he,' girl?"

"Captain Nevada."

If it had not been for his useless legs Colonel Bluff, the California Croesus, would have leaped from the bed.

"Do you say Captain Nevada?" he shouted, and Opal frightened drew back a step. "Then, I have been lured hither by a lie!"

"Not an intentional lie," put in Opal who seemed to be eager to come to Norgan's defense. "When the messenger left, Captain Nevada was believed to be dead."

"But he was far from that, eh?"

"He was very near the end. Afterward he was mad for some hours."

"But now—"

"He is on the road to Sacramento."

"To stop me?"

"Yes."

The paper which Boss Nevada had intrusted to Opal was in the girl's hands and Colonel Bluff reached out to take it as he finished.

"It is yours," the girl remarked dropping the sealed message into the extended palm.

She saw his fingers close eagerly over it, but making no effort to open it, he looked up at her again.

"Who are you, girl?"

"I am Opal."

"Yes, yes, you have told me that before. It answers nothing. Where did you come from?"

"To Satan City do you mean?"

"Yes."

"I came from Camp Coyote within the shadow of the cone of Mount Shasta."

"When was that?"

"Twelve years ago."

A frown settled over Colonel Bluff's brow, and the hands shut again.

"They kept me in ignorance of all this," she heard him say in tones not addressed to her.

"All this time Boss Nevada has been an oath-breaker; the man I trusted too."

The beauty of No Man's Ground waited for him to resume with her.

"Twelve years ago," he suddenly went on, repeating her reply. "Did you ever read the code my men are supposed to keep here?"

"I have read it."

"Every section, eh?"

"All of them, I think."

"What does section 99 say?"

Opal looked down into the dark eyes riveted on her and changed color.

"It forbids women from living on No Man's Ground," she answered at length.

"Yet, you are here."

She did not know how to reply to this, but in a moment, with a smile, she responded:

"I had no other home."

"The waif plea. I see!" grinned Colonel Bluff his stony countenance relaxing for a moment. "I don't know that you are to be greatly blamed. They tolerated, they encouraged you. I wanted all my men to be faithful. I know that where woman is a secret is of no account, and that love makes the best of men traitors."

He spoke with a bitterness that seemed to sting.

"Are you the only woman here?" he asked.

Opal caught his eye, but did not speak.

"Why don't you go on?" he cried. "Come closer, girl. You have been here long enough to know that I am useless from my waist down; that I am a cripple who, despite his wealth, is an object of pity among his fellow-men."

She went forward.

"You do not answer me when I ask if you are the only woman in Satan City. The code says there shall be none here. When I heard that you lived in my domain against the statutes, I nearly fell from my saddle—as near as a Mazeppa could fall. There is another woman here. You know it."

Opal caught her breath, and some courage at the same time.

"There is another woman here, Colonel Bluff," she replied.

"You have seen her?"

"Once."

"When was that?"

"A few nights ago—or, when Nichol Macbeth, the Gold Goth, was killed."

"What do you mean?"

The girl's answer had opened up a new field to the California nabob.

"I see that Norgan kept something back," he exclaimed. "I know nothing of this crime. Tell me, girl, but first, one thing about yourself. Do you love the chemist of No Man's Ground?"

The hand which Colonel Bluff was about to take while he listened to Opal's narrative, was hastily withdrawn, and the little figure at the cot fell back.

"Norgan is my friend, Colonel Bluff. Norgan has always been kind to me," she rejoined.

"Therefore," with a smile, "therefore, you have thought it your duty to love my chemist?"

"Did he mention it to you? Did Norgan confess?"

"Yes, and by his confession he lost the best position I had to give away," was the quick interruption. "He loves you; now, what do you say? Speak!"

She came forward again, and with a quickness that startled the man on the cot.

"I love Norgan," she said, calmly, bending over him till their eyes seemed to touch. "I could not do otherwise. I have never told him this much—"

"I left him in doubt," broke in Colonel Bluff. "I offered to make him Czar of No Man's Ground—to put him into Captain Nevada's shoes, for, though the traitor lives, I consider his place vacant; but he astonished me by saying that he loved you and could not take the master's oath. Girl, you must throw this love to the winds of Shasta Land. You must tell Norgan that you hate him, that he loves in vain—"

"No, no; not that!" cried Opal, shrinking away. "Anything but this awful sacrifice, Colonel Bluff!"

"It must be! I will have it so, for I am a man of iron with a heart of steel!"

And darting toward the beauty of Satan City as if he had forgotten his legs, he clutched her sleeve.

But with a wild cry she tore away, and fell heavily against the cabin logs.

CHAPTER XXVI.

COMPACTS IN THE DARK.

COLONEL BLUFF looked with a grim smile at the results of his passion.

"There's love between them, and, by Jove! it must not be," he growled. "I want Norgan for my own uses. He is the shrewdest man I have in camp now, and he's got a cool head on his shoulders. Besides, the girl has no business here under the code, and I'll see what my hand can do toward tearing them asunder. I hate women as I have cause to hate her, and one must not step between me and victory at this stage of the game."

Opal, in a dead swoon at the foot of the wall, was not a pretty spectacle for Lolas and Norgan when they came.

Colonel Bluff's command, cruel in the extreme, had struck deeper than he thought, but not a sign of pity for his victim crossed his face.

By superhuman efforts he dragged himself across the room to where the girl lay, and began to use all means in his power to restore her to consciousness.

In this he succeeded after a spell, and saw the expressive eyes, still full of fear, fixed on his face.

Opal looked at him a while without speaking, and then went to the door.

"One word, girl," said the Crippled Croesus.

She stopped, and with her hand on the latch awaited his further words.

"I want you to remember that I am master here," said he, lifting a finger. "You break with my assayer at once, understand, or the power of Colonel Bluff will come between you and your dreams of bliss."

"Just as if I could forget," answered the girl, and with not another word she shut the door, leaving the man of iron to himself.

Opal went direct to her own abode.

The shadows of night had fallen over Satan City. The bad crept into the cabin ahead of her, and when she opened the door she felt that she was not alone.

There was a statue in the shanty darker than the shadows resting there, and it came forward as the girl opened the door and said with a laugh.

"Back at last, girl. I have been waiting for you."

Opal fell back a pace at sound of the voice.

"Who is the man up in Lolas's cabin?" it continued. "You have just come from there."

"It is Colonel Bluff."

"Not the cripple of Sacramento!—not the master of No Man's Ground."

"He is here."

For a moment the speaker kept silence, but his stature seemed to increase as Opal looked.

"What brought him up?"

"What took Boss Nevada down?"

"By heavens! this is getting interesting," and the sentence was supplemented by a light laugh. "Now we have the gold tramps, and now the so-called Lord of No Man's Ground comes to see us. How does he look, girl?"

"I am not a judge if I am expected to compare him to his appearance when he was here last before I came, for I have never seen him before."

"So you told me yesterday. But is he badly crippled?"

"In the legs! Yes, they seem to be useless."

The man who was Dun Duff appeared to take great secret delight in the girl's answer.

"They are useless, but he makes up for this deficiency in his head and arms," he responded.

"Who came with him?"

"Norgan."

"Ah! the messenger who went down. His presence here shows that Captain Nevada did not meet him."

"It does."

Dun Duff looked out the window and watched the darkness a spell.

"Are you going back to Colonel Bluff?" he asked turning suddenly to the girl.

"No," said Opal with a shudder.

"Did you leave him quite alone?"

"I did."

The man of mystery, tracked by Gideon Goldbar, Mona's detective, was pleased at this information.

He stepped to the door and touched the brim of his hat to the girl.

In another moment he was gone.

"So he came up to take the helm!" he ejaculated, seeming to speak through his teeth as he walked toward the cabin where Colonel Bluff was impatiently waiting for Norgan's return and cursing his absence. "I wonder if he knows I am here. Why not? He had Norgan for a companion back, and of course he had all the news retailed to him as he rode along. He hasn't forgotten me. No, no! I don't see how he could."

Dun Duff kept on to the little cabin whose owner, as the reader will readily recall, we saw last shut up in the underground crypt of the secret bonanza.

He halted a few feet from the door and surveyed the shanty for a few moments with a secret pleasure lighting up the dark depths of his eyes.

He seemed to be debating whether to go on or not, but all at once, as if he had decided in favor of advancing, he started forward.

The inside of the cabin held the silence of the grave.

It was dark within, but this did not deter the man of nerve at the door.

He went boldly in, losing himself in the darkness as it were, and standing still for a second just beyond the threshold.

"Can it be that he isn't here now?" Dun Duff asked himself in inaudible tones. "A man in his condition cannot walk, and we know he did not bring his wheeled chair along."

At that juncture the stillness within the four walls was broken.

"Is that you, Norgan?"

Dun Duff started forward with an unstruck match in his hand.

In a second he had drawn it across the table which he had encountered, and as the flame sprung into existence he leaned forward, holding his breath from curiosity.

In a little while he was throwing the light of his match upon a face that rested in a hand above the hard pillow of a gold-camp cot.

Two men were looking, almost glaring, into each other's eyes, and the silence between them resembled that which falls between two gladiators who meet in the arena for a duel to the death.

Colonel Duff saw that his visitor was not Norgan, nor was it Lolas, the man for whom he had sent the assayer.

"Well, Colonel, how is it?" asked Dun Duff. "But wait till I get a permanent light. No? Don't you want one, eh?"

"Let your match go out," came the reply, as the little stick broke, being burned in two.

"Just as you say. We can talk in the dark," laughed Duff. "I hardly thought you would come up to No Man's Ground."

"You don't know me."

"But I ought to, eh, colonel? I ought to be pretty well acquainted with the Nabob of Sacramento, and the owner of the secret bonanzas of Shasta Land."

"When did you come?"

"I've been here some time."

"Still fighting me?"

"Why not?"

If Dun Duff could have pierced the darkness that fell between them he would have seen a hand steal across the cot, and the fingers of it wind themselves about the hilt of a bowie whose sheath was the covering of the bed.

"Yes, why not?" continued Duff, in the same tones, with scarcely a break between the present and his last words. "Though I am known as Dun Duff here, you know me all the same. I am the same enemy I have always been. You have grown rich by a system of secret rapine which has forfeited your life a score of times. Because Norgan took to you a certain message from a certain man, supposed to be dead at the time, you come up here—for what? To kill a person whom you dare not face in the light of day—a person believed by the superstitious men who have been your slaves, to exist only in the spirit—a ghost of the underground caves of No Man's Domain."

The hand and the dagger met more firmly in the dark.

"What have you done since coming here?" asked Colonel Bluff.

"I've kept my eyes open as I should do. I knew from the first that I was in a nest of vipers, that my life was not safe a moment among the bronzed slaves of Satan City, with Boss Nevada at their head. I soon discovered that I had a detective at my heels—a man who is not in your employ, Colonel."

"Who is he?"

"Here he is known as Gideon Goldbar, elsewhere he is Captain Velvet. His pard, a person called Johnny Jumpup is here also."

Colonel Bluff uttered a light cry at this.

He had not forgotten the man who had called on him in Sacramento and who wanted to go to No Man's Ground as his agent, and still fresh in his mind was the interference of Nina, the dumb.

"So Johnny Jumpup was a sleuth's agent, was he?" he exclaimed.

"Yes. He called on you in Sacramento, I believe."

"He did, the spy!" growled Colonel Bluff.

"In some respects he is as good as his master," smiled Dun Duff. "Well, they are both here—master and man."

"In whose employ?"

"In hers."

The cripple of Sacramento fell back almost to the wall.

"Not in the Mexican's?" he cried.

"I mean in Mona's."

Colonel Bluff released the dagger and threw his body forward, at the same time putting out his hand, which fell on Dun Duff's wrist as if fate had guided it.

"Do you hate me as of old?" he exclaimed.

"Why shouldn't I, Colonel?"

"Can't there be peace between us for a time?"

"At what price?"

"Make your own proposition."

Dun Duff could hardly keep back the laugh of victory that knocked at his lips.

"Do you mean that?"

"Every word of it," replied the Sacramentan through his teeth.

The Cool-head from the South seemed to reflect.

"You will reject my proposition, I am sure, he went on, a minute later.

"You have not tried me."

"Well, I demand the bonanza secret of No Man's Ground, and one-half interest in it. I ask to be placed in Boss Nevada's shoes with all the powers that position confers on the holder. I demand that you go back to Sacramento tomorrow, and that I be left master here by your proclamation to the men who are yours, body and soul."

There was no answer.

As the last word died away Dun Duff could hear the short breaths of the man in the dark.

Twice the unseen hand stole toward the hidden dagger and as often it came back empty.

"You are not very modest," said Colonel Bluff, at last.

"I never was," was the quick response.

"You want a good deal."

"More than you would take under the circumstances? I know the man I am talking to. I have no need for mincing words with Colonel Bluff. He is not expected to mince any with me."

"By Jove! if I knew where your heart was, Dun Duff, this business would take a sudden turn," passed through Colonel Bluff's brain, but the words he spoke aloud were quite different.

"I accept your proposition. You are now master of No Man's Ground, with all the power that position gives."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A HIGH HAND.

"I HAVE won!"

Colonel Bluff on the cot in the dark corner did not hear these three words as they dropped from the tongue of the man who had just left him with the tread of a conqueror.

Dun Duff did not notice the eyes that were on the alert when he came forth; he was not on the lookout for spies though he had one at his heels.

"I've got news for the captain," muttered the man who watched Colonel Bluff's interviewer. "The Crippled Nabob of California has arrived and Dun Duff has just seen him."

Johnny Jumpup did not see fit to follow Duff far. Taking it for granted that the new master of the pards of No Man's Ground would proceed direct to his cabin he turned aside and went in another direction.

We will keep track of Dun Duff.

The victory obtained where he had left Colonel Bluff had imparted a gleam to his eyes.

He was now clothed with the autocratic authority which had once belonged to Boss Nevada.

Not only this but ere he left the cabin he had received from Colonel Bluff's lips the secret of No Man's Ground. More than this even, he carried in his bosom a little map which was the key to that secret, and on which was marked out the road that led to the secret bonanza and the hidden crypt.

But there was one thing Dun Duff had not obtained—the combination of the crypt's lock. This was the secret of a man miles and miles away, and for aught he knew Boss Nevada might never return.

But he had learned enough for one night, and he could afford to be satisfied.

Dun Duff walked straight to the opening of the secret mine, as straight, we might say, as if one familiar with the ground was his guide.

He struck a match in the corridor and found the door of the crypt.

On a stone-like shelf above the door he discovered a lamp which made a permanent though not very effective light.

Dun examined the iron door by its aid. He was surprised to find how solidly it was set in the stone.

Again and again he turned the nickel-plated knob and tried various combinations, but without success.

Once he cried:

"If I had Boss Nevada here I would choke the secret out of him, but my arm isn't long enough to drag him back over the Sacramento trail."

Once he thought he heard a noise beyond the iron door and he checked his operations to listen awhile; but in a minute he reached the conclusion that he had been deceived.

"Pish! there's nothing here for me now!" he exclaimed. "I have found the locked door of the treasure-chest of No Man's Ground. As I am master here, I can have the door broken by the sledges of Satan City; but I'll issue no such orders till Colonel Bluff is back in Sacramento. He leaves to-morrow as a part of our compact. He disobeys at his peril."

Restoring the lamp to its niche he went back, crossing the Square where he had lately stood before the gathering mob of Gold Goths, and looked toward Lolas's cabin.

The little window was no longer dark.

The rather bright light attracted him, and he went toward it.

He was within twenty feet of the cabin when the door opened from the inside, and there stood on the threshold for a moment the man he hated—Gideon Goldbar!

"That is the sleuth who told me to my teeth that he was at my heels for a purpose," seemed to come through Dun Duff's teeth, while he stared at the well-built figure of his rival for victory in the game. "The woman who put him on the trail knew what she was about, for in all California there is no man I would rather avoid than Captain Velvet. Mona's sleuth-hound! The mask is off now and he stands revealed. He knows what I am after as well as I know myself. He knows that for me to be clothed with the power once held by Boss Nevada, is to win the game unless I am checked. What passed between him and Colonel Bluff? I am not going to waste time finding out. I shall play my first card right away, and it shall be a trump."

He had watched the detective leave the cabin, and had seen him vanish.

In another moment he was at the door himself.

"Colonel, I want a public acknowledgment of my authority!" he cried, appearing suddenly to the maimed millionaire, who had not recovered from Captain Velvet's visit.

"A public recognition?" was the answer.

"Yes."

"To-morrow—"

"No, to-night—now! You go away to-morrow."

Colonel Bluff, unused to being dictated to in this manner, bit his lips.

"Summon the men, then," said he.

"No; we will go to them. I know where they are."

Before Colonel Bluff could answer Dun Duff had stooped over the cot and taken him in his arms.

"I won't hurt you," he went on with a smile. "You don't weigh a ton, and I can carry you with ease."

The Crippled Croesus threw one arm about Duff's neck for self-support, and was borne toward the door.

As the new master put out his hand to open it, it seemed to open of its own accord, and he stood face to face in the light with Norgan.

The assayer fell back with a sudden stare as he beheld the strange spectacle before him.

"Stand aside, sir!" commanded Dun Duff.

"I am master here now."

"You?"

Norgan who had flushed to the temples transferred his look to the man in the giant's arms.

"Is this true, Colonel?" he asked.

"It is true, Norgan; but did you find Lolas?"

"Lolas is not in camp and has not been for some hours. He went away about the time Boss Nevada turned up mad."

"Deserted do you think?"

"I'm afraid it has that look."

Dun Duff showed his impatience to be off.

It might spoil his plans to have too much conversation pass between Colonel Bluff and Norgan, so he pushed the chemist aside and strode away.

Norgan's hands shut mechanically at this piece of insolence.

"In the name of God!" he exclaimed, "what infernal spell made that cool head master here?"

Then he watched Dun Duff's tall figure as it moved away with Colonel Bluff in its arms.

"I'm going to see the end of this!" continued Norgan bounding forward. "If I am not mistaken the secret we have guarded so well is in danger—ay, more than the secret."

He kept at a respectful distance behind Dun Duff and his burden, but near enough to keep both in sight.

The plotter of California went forward with eager strides, making a bee-line for the open door of Shasta Sam's ranch beyond which could be seen the usual crowd oblivious to the last events of the day.

Dun Duff's big figure loomed up suddenly between Norgan and the light of the mountain den.

The latter covered the remaining distance by several leaps that brought him close to the door.

"Great Caesar! the master from Sacramento!" sung out the man who first spied Dun Duff the moment he appeared in the light.

Where there had been a babel of voices silence fell in an instant, and every eye saw Colonel Bluff in the arms of the evil genius of the camp.

A singular smile grew into being at Dun Duff's lips as he passed down the counter and quietly placed the Colonel thereon with his useless legs hanging alongside in a pitiable manner.

Having done this he stationed himself so near that he could touch his prisoner, and then turned his face full upon the awe-stricken crowd!

"Gentlemen, our master has a word to say," said he with a basty glance at Colonel Bluff. It was a glance that meant a great deal.

Almost as white as the snows on the cone of Shasta the crippled magnate looked into the bronzed faces of the men who had been his slaves.

Some of them he had never seen before, but they had taken the terrible oath of secrecy and allegiance, and not once had they thought of breaking it.

"Go ahead, Colonel," continued Dun Duff in tones of command which did not escape the crowd. "The boys are anxious to hear the first orders under the new regime."

Colonel Bluff seemed to recover a bit of self-possession.

"Gentlemen, the man at my left has taken Captain Nevada's place," said he with an effort.

"I have acknowledged him as the master of No Man's Ground and Alcalde of Satan City. You will obey him as you have obeyed Boss Nevada, without questionings and without hesitation."

A sort of dazed wonder fell upon the crowd. Men looked from each other to the man who had just spoken and at the gloating desperado at his side.

Norgan on the outside went back with a slight cry.

"We'll go back now, Colonel," observed Dun Duff, scarcely giving the nabob a chance to breathe after his proclamation.

"Don't take him away. We'd like to see the Colonel a little," cried the pards pressing forward. "He doesn't come up this way often. We want to tell him that we're as true as steel."

"Take me away," said Colonel Bluff in altered tones. "I can't let these men talk to me. You know why."

Dun Duff promptly interposed his figure be-

tween the Californian and the pressing crowd, and lifted the former from the counter.

It was a bit of mystery to the men.

"When do you go back, Colonel?" called out one.

"He doesn't know," answered Dun Duff. "You men must not forget that I am at the helm now and Colonel Bluff your master has commanded you to obey me."

Despite these words the still thunderstruck crowd stared at their master.

All seemed to see that he was in the shadow of some dreadful fear.

Dun Duff almost brushed the figure that crouched at the door when he went out with the crippled gold-bug in his arms.

The figure stood erect and looked at the giant as he crossed the Plaza.

"I see what is before me," he cried. "It is a struggle for life—for love—for everything that is dear to me. It is either Dun Duff or Norgan. And by heavens! if I lose my head for a moment it will be Dun Duff the gold scorpion of the South!"

The last words were still on his tongue when the chemist of No Man's Ground turned away, but instead of darting into Shasta Sam's whose door and crowd invited him, he hurried toward the cabins.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

SECTION 101.

"WHAT do you want?" asked a voice as Norgan was about to rush into a certain shanty which barred his further progress.

The assayer fell back and looked at the speaker.

He had stepped forward from he knew not where and stood like a statue in bronze between him and the portal.

A second look told Norgan that he confronted Johnny Jumpup.

"Where's your friend?"

"Gideon Goldbar, eh?"

"Yes."

"He isn't in at present," answered Johnny, who had not gone off with the Goths.

"Where can he be found?"

"I cannot tell you. If it is very important and no secret, I guess you can risk the matter with me."

Norgan stepped close and regarded the guard for a few seconds.

He had come to see the detective; he did not like to trust another.

"Just as you like," continued Johnny, smiling. "Of course I ain't Gideon Goldbar, but I'm nearer to him than anybody else in Shasta Land."

"Then I want to tell him what has happened," said Norgan.

"What has happened?"

"The domain has a new master."

"Yes. He came in a while ago from Sacramento."

"But I don't refer to him," replied the assayer, quickly.

"Oh! To whom, then?"

"To Dun Duff."

If it had been any place else, Johnny Jumpup would have vented his astonishment in a prolonged whistle. As it was, he shrugged his shoulders and looked at Norgan.

"When did this happen?"

"Just now. The ceremony has not been concluded ten minutes. It took place at Shasta Sam's, where all orders are first promulgated."

"Was Colonel Bluff there?"

"Yes."

"He did not walk?"

"No. Dun Duff carried him down, and took him back in the same manner."

"Looks like he manipulated things to suit himself, eh?"

The assayer started.

"Dun Duff has a grip on Colonel Bluff that holds him in spite of everything. What is the spell? Do you know?"

Johnny Jumpup shook his head.

"Does Gideon Goldbar know?"

"You must ask him."

Norgan, of No Man's Ground, looked away as if he expected to see the man he wanted to find.

"If Gideon comes within an hour, set a light in the window of this cabin, will you?" he went on.

"It shall be done."

"Thanks," said Norgan. "Within an hour, remember. After that time you need not bother about the light."

Johnny Jumpup leaned against the logs and saw the chemist move off, watching him till his figure disappeared.

"Pears to me that somebody's playin' trumps," muttered the detective's pard. "Master o' No Man's Ground, eh? Crowned with all the authority that place gives one, of course. I'll bet my head that Colonel Bluff didn't ride all the way up from Sacramento, tied in the saddle at that, to make our tiger autocrat. No; he came for another purpose. But Dun Duff has played the first cards—that is all."

He turned back into the cabin and shut the door.

"A light in the window if the captain comes back in an hour; that's the bargain," murmured Johnny. "When Norgan sees it he will come here. Don't I see that there's a link o' love between him and the girl, and haven't I read other looks, too, during the last several days? Master of Satan City—Dun Duff. By Jupiter! I can't forget that. I see what it means, Blood, gentlemen, blood." and Johnny Jumpup smiled grimly as if the prospect near at hand had at that moment risen before him.

Captain Velvet, or Gideon Goldbar by which name we know him best, seemed in no hurry to put in an appearance, and the man in the cabin faithful to his trusts sat down to wait for him.

Half an hour passed and he did not come.

All at once a voice came in from the outside.

Johnny left his place and went to the door.

He was about to open it and look out when he heard it again.

"A proclamation, eh? Is that according to the queer code of No Man's Ground?" he asked himself.

Then standing against the wall at one side of the door Johnny heard distinctly spoken on the night air words like these:

"Listen all who hear. Oh ye! Oh ye! Oh ye! By authority granted him by Section 101 of the Solemn Code and Covenant of No Man's Ground, Captain Duncan Duff warns all people not members of our league to vacate the premises of Satan City within three hours, and to quit the domain itself immediately thereafter. A refusal on the part of any one to obey this mandate will incur the penalty attached to a violation of the section!"

It was apparent from the sound of the voice that the crier stood in the street directly in front of the cabin, and when Johnny Jumpup turned to the window he saw a man walk away.

"Still playing his hand!" ejaculated the detective's pard. "Just now the pains and penalties of Section 101 are aimed at Captain Velvet and Johnny Jumpup, for since Dun Duff has become the head of the league of No Man's Ground we are the only people on the outside. But go slow, Captain Dun. The man I serve came up here for a purpose and it is to be accomplished at the risk of his life. You don't want the broken bowie pieced, you would keep the dastardly crimes of the past in the dark, and be able to say that the woman who waits in the dark found nothing. We laugh at your proclamation. It has been fifty to one before in Gideon Goldbar's life. He will not shrink if it should be that again."

The man who communed in this strain with himself was not the only person startled by the nocturnal proclamation.

"In Heaven's name, what is this the beginning of?" cried the young girl, who had caught the sounds which had been borne to Johnny Jumpup's ears. "All aliens to quit No Man's Ground within three hours! Dun Duff is showing his hand. His first blow is against his rival, Mona's sleuth-hound. Does he know what brought the detective hither? The spell that he has woven round Colonel Bluff is full of subtle witchery, and the work of a cool devil. What will Gideon Goldbar do? The penalty attached to Section 101 is death. We had a fool here once. He refused to obey a similar proclamation issued by Boss Nevada, and his life went out like a candle suddenly snuffed. Has Captain Velvet the courage to treat this command with contempt?"

Opal had barely ceased, when a rap sounded on her door.

She opened it, to see a visitor quite unexpected.

"The Colonel would like to see you, miss," said the man, as his hand dropped from the brim of his hat. "You know, perhaps, where he is to be found—at Lolas's cabin."

Though he had delivered the message he had been commissioned to deliver, the gloating eyes of Dun Duff remained fixed on Opal's face.

She met the look calmly.

"Do you ever congratulate the new masters of No Man's Ground?" he asked.

"We've never had but one."

"That is true; but you have another now."

"You?"

"The man before you! You heard the proclamation a while ago, did you not?"

"I heard it."

"As one of the people of Satan City, it was not new to you."

"I knew Section 101 was in the code."

"Well, we want no aliens near the secret," continued Dun Duff. "I intend to carry out the code and the wishes of Colonel Bluff, who, as I have said, waits for you at Lolas's shanty."

In another second the beauty of the Shasta Camp stood alone once more.

Still fresh in her mind was her last interview with the Crippled Croesus of California.

She recollected that at his announcement that she would have to hate Norgan, she had fallen senseless at the foot of the cabin wall.

Now she had been summoned to his presence again.

To have the command repeated and emphasized? She could not tell.

Opal seemed reluctant to leave the cabin

which had been the sharer of her little thoughts and secrets for so many years.

She did not stir till Dun Duff had been gone some minutes.

When she passed out she saw a bright light in the window of the cabin which had become the abode of Gideon Goldbar and pard.

It was unusually bright, and the girl wondered what it meant.

"Mona's sleuth-hound is in peril," she thought.

"Unless he balks the ambition of Dun Duff he will never get to put the broken dagger together. It is a strange, wild story that he tells me. A woman was once happily married. Her husband was all pure to her when he was living a double life, with the sin of more than one crime at his heart. Mona, the woman who sits in the dark with the child Veta, is that person.

Her first child is somewhere—as lost to her as though a mountain rose above her grave. Step by step Captain Velvet has proceeded in Mona's interest. He has not found the missing child, but he has picked up link after link of the chain of crime. He knows that one night Mona's husband was found in his room stabbed a dozen times and mutilated for life; he knows that she found near him a broken dagger blade. Point and hilt were gone. Mona has that blade still, and her sleuth wants the missing parts. That crime was the one which unmasked Mona's husband to her. Then he stood before her the desperado, the secret leader of a band of mountain cut-throats. She nursed him through his wounds, and bade him good-bye. That night the child went. The one she loves now—the little Veta with the gold hair—is one she has taken to cheer her in her blindness, but the little girl thinks she is her real mother. Mona believes that when the dagger has been restored she will know whose hands robbed her, and for what.

Such is Captain Velvet's story. This is the bunt which has brought him to No Man's Ground. Why has he shadowed Dun Duff? Is it because the secret is locked in that man's bosom? Is this why the mandate that all aliens must quit No Man's Ground has gone forth? But I forget. I have been summoned to Colonel Bluff's side. What does the maimed magnate of California want with me?"

Opal, the waif, made up for lost time between her abode and Lolas's cabin.

She did not rap, but opened the door and walked in.

"Ah! I thought you would never come," greeted her.

She went forward. The speaker was the Sacramento Nabob. His eyes glittered strangely.

"Stand more in the light, girl. I want to look at you. There!"

Then he watched her without saying a word, and Opal seemed to feel the curious eyes of the Crippled Croesus entering her very soul.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE CRIPPLE'S CRAWL.

"WHO are you, girl?" asked Colonel Bluff, at last.

"I have already told you. I am Opal."

He looked at her a long time in silence as before.

"That is all, Opal. You can go now."

Instead of stirring, the beauty of No Man's Ground did not move.

This sudden and unaccountable dismissal was not in accordance with her expectations.

She had been summoned to the cabin for, she thought, an interview. Why had she been stared at and asked but one question?

It was a mystery to the young girl.

"That is all, my child," continued the crippled gold-bug, with a gesture of dismissal which could not be misunderstood. "You know that No Man's Ground has a new alcalde. He will carry out the code to the letter. Section 99 affects you. Go home and wait."

Opal saw that the tensely-drawn countenance before her was not that of a man with whom she could bandy words.

She made no reply to his last words, but with her gaze fastened on the face as if she would never forget it, she went to the door and passed out.

The interview had not lasted ten minutes.

"What manner of man is he?" exclaimed Opal to herself, as she walked toward the Square, though she did not reach it, turning aside and going to her own abode.

"Well, what did he say this time?"

The girl stopped and looked at the speaker, who seemed to have overtaken her with noiseless step.

"Norgan! He said nothing to take time in telling. Again he asked me who I was, made me stand in the light, and eyed me like a hawk."

"Did he say nothing about the change of captains?"

"He said he presumed I had heard of it."

"Was that all, Opal?"

"He told me that Captain Duff intended to carry out the code to the letter, including Section 99."

"He mentioned it, did he?"

"Yes."

The young couple standing under the stars, looked at one another a moment without speaking.

"What will Gideon Goldbar do?" asked the girl, after a look toward a certain cabin, in the one window of which she had lately seen a bright light. "Of course he knows all!"

"He knows all, and he is going to stick."

"With the camp against him? It is folly!"

"With the code, you mean, Opal?"

"In a case of this kind, camp and code are one."

Norgan the assayer touched her arm.

"Let us walk away—toward your house," he went on with a smile, and then he continued, lowering his voice. "As I have said, Mona's shadow is going to stay. He and his man Johnny Jumpup have been given three hours in which to quit Satan City. Already the first hour is on the wane. The time will expire before midnight. I have just come from the aliens."

"From Captain Velvet and his pard?"

"Yes. Mona's sleuth has made a discovery, new to him to some extent, but old to us."

"What is that?"

"He has met the Queen of Darkness."

Opal drew back without moving out of her tracks, and looked at the chemist.

"He met her pretty much as Johnny Jumpup did in the heart of Mine No. 3. His agility and superior strength overcame the woman, and he forced from her a wonderful story which I dare not tell you here. You told me, Opal, that the figure you saw fly at Nicol Macbeth the Gold Goth was not a man, and I was inclined to laugh at you. I know now that the Goth was killed by the Queen of Darkness, about whom Boss Nevada raved when the mad fit was on, and not by Dun Duff, who was shot for the murder by the Goth in the saddle."

"The gold tramps would not have believed me had I told them this," observed the girl.

"You would have been laughed at for your pains, and it is well that you kept silence. We will not talk about what Gideon Goldbar extracted from the tenant of the mine; neither does it matter now who the woman is. We have a course—one sure one—before us."

"And that is, Norgan—"

"Flight!"

The chemist pronounced the word with his eyes fixed on the fair creature before him.

She made no reply.

"Captain Velvet has not counseled this," he continued. "He knows nothing whatever of my decision. I am doing what I think best for you."

"And for yourself, too, I trust."

"Don't think of me," he rejoined, with a light laugh. "I am only Norgan, a chip on the sea of fate. There is to be another mandate on the heels of the first."

"From Captain Duff?"

"From the man who has played the coolest game ever played in California."

"Will they obey?" asked Opal, quickly.

"The miners, girl?"

"Will they obey the mandates of this prince of devils?"

"You forget their oath of allegiance. You overlook the fact that before them all Colonel Bluff proclaimed Dun Duff master, and called on all to honor him as such. You were not made to take that terrible oath, nor to write your name to the Code of No Man's Ground in your own blood. We trusted you without this part of the ceremony. The men will obey Dun Duff. Some of them are desperadoes, but they are not traitors. A change of masters is nothing to them so long as Colonel Bluff sanctions it."

"But does he do this, Norgan? Isn't there a spell over him? Isn't he a puppet in the hands of Dun Duff, who is playing for high stakes?"

"Dare you tell them this, girl?"

Opal lost color and seemed to shrink away.

"No, I dare not," said she. "But they may force some things from me if they let themselves be hoodwinked too far."

They were near the girl's cabin now, and Norgan released the arm to let her in.

"You have not answered me about my proposition," observed he.

"About the flight? If there is nothing left but this—nothing a shade better, mind you—I consent."

"I promise you that nothing better is left!"

Then the door opened and shut, and Norgan the assayer walked off with a thoughtful step, that made no noise as he passed along.

With a mind filled with the strangest emotions, the wail of No Man's Ground began to prepare for the journey into the unknown.

The little cabin had been her home for years. Around it she had passed her girlhood, and had developed into a womanhood calculated to impress and fascinate the most cynical.

She knew nothing about herself more than she had told Colonel Bluff, and the extent of this information was, as we know, that she was Opal—nothing more.

Of course the paper discovered in the Mexican button taken from Boss Nevada's hand, had filled her mind with the thought that she might be a person with a history, and when Gideon Goldbar told her that he was Mona's sleuth-hound,

the same thought took new root and flourished for awhile.

But now amid the accumulating excitement, all was chaos again.

Colonel Bluff had come to No Man's Ground despite his helpless legs, Boss Nevada had gone away, perhaps never to return, and there was a new master over all—a man who loved to play coolly a game fit only for the coolest of heads.

Opal hoped she would not be disturbed while she made preparations for flight with Norgan, who had resolved to break the code in order to get beyond the approaching scenes of excitement.

As we have said, she had not much to take away.

She had come to No Man's Ground with nothing, and in going off she would not be rich.

Suddenly Opal heard a noise beyond the window.

It was the unmistakable tread of a miner's boot.

Indignant at the thought that she was watched, she sprung up from her work and went forward.

There was no one at the window then, and Opal's hand fell on the latch.

Just then she heard the same voice she had heard once before since sundown.

"Oh, ye! Oh, ye! Oh, ye! Under section one hundred of the Code of No Man's Ground, the master, Duncan Duff, forbids any citizen from quitting Satan City without authority, on pain of sentence under the laws of the domain. Let all who hear obey the command. Long live the master, and death to the violators of the code!"

The girl in the cabin heard the proclamation with blanched cheeks and bated breath.

Her hand fell from the latch and she went backward, the last words ringing in her ears.

"It is too late—too late!" she cried. "The hand of Dun Duff has fastened on me. In God's name, there can be but one meaning to this infamy! I am to become his wife, or worse, if his villainy can make me so. Who told him that I contemplated flight? What traitor has betrayed me into his power?"

For several moments the young girl stood like a statue, with the lamplight revealing the despair which had settled over her face.

"I could appeal, but I would thus reveal my designs and betray Norgan," she suddenly exclaimed. "I will not face Colonel Bluff again. The Crippled Croesus, who has allowed himself to be 'spelled' by Dun Duff, has eyes I do not like. There are now two alternatives before me—one to stay, and let the man of cunning have his way; the other to defy the code, and fly."

Opal stood undecided a while longer, then she suddenly stooped and picked up the little bundle she had recently deposited on the table.

"Come what may, I remain!" she cried, throwing the bundle across the room and watching it alight in one corner. "I may be choosing wrongly, but with the help of Heaven I will fight out the battle where I am. The time may come—"

"The time has come!" cried a voice, as the door was burst open, and Opal fell back with a startled cry as she saw Colonel Bluff drag himself across the sill. "In Heaven's name, why do you stay here one minute? More than your life is at stake. They can't make me obey them in every particular. I will not! Turn your back on No Man's Ground. Get away from the touch of the man who made me what I am. Go to your mother, girl."

"To my mother?" cried Opal, starting toward him, with his body resting on his hands and raised half-way from the floor.

"To your mother! Go to Mona, of Sacramento, and tell her that your father, Colonel Bluff, sent you to her!"

It was a frightened look that shone from Opal's eyes, and her voice was a cry as she recoiled from the Croesus.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE EVE OF DEATH.

It is no wonder that the wail of No Man's Ground stared at the man from whose mouth burst this terrible and unexpected revelation.

Colonel Bluff the crippled nabob her father?

It was something which she had never dreamed of, and the announcement coming when it did, was enough to render her speechless.

Opal did not know what to do, and so she kept away, but looked at the form on the floor with doubt and horror mingled in her eyes.

"You don't believe me. Ha! ha! I thought you would not," laughed Colonel Bluff. "I saw your mother as she looked years ago when I placed you in the light in Lola's cabin. Again I repeat my warning. Go away. Don't let the light of the day find you in Satan City."

"But the proclamation? You forgot that!" exclaimed the girl starting toward him.

"I have heard it," answered he. "They are going to enforce Section 100, which I wrote with my own hands. You are forbidden to quit camp."

"How did he know I had thought of going?"

"You don't know the man who calls himself

Dun Duff. I do, alas! Don't question me, girl. Go!"

She could not leave him without putting the question that rose to her lips.

"If you are my father, why does Mona sit alone in darkness, sending out sleuths all the time? Why haven't you helped her?"

He seemed to fall back from these words, but his eyes did not leave her.

"The barrier!—the crime! you know nothing about it," he exclaimed. "But somebody has told you something about Mona, your mother. Who did this?"

His last words were a demand.

"Never mind," rejoined Opal who hurriedly resolved not to betray Gideon Goldbar. "I know something about Mona."

"Your mother! By the heaven above us, child, she bears that relation to you! But you linger here. You must go! Don't think that your duty is to stay with me because of the confession I have made. I am going back now. I have crawled over the ground like a wounded snake to give you warning."

He turned to the door and dragged himself to the sill.

"Why have you given Dun Duff this authority?" cried the girl at his side. "You don't—you can't know the cool cunning of the man. Why?"

He held up one of his hands to stop her.

"I wish the wretch was roasting on a spit in Tartarus!" he hissed. "I could kill him with the same grace that I would finish a mountain lion clawing at my throat. Don't I know that Dun Duff wants the millions of No Man's Ground? Ah! girl, he will not stop there. And yet I, a crippled coward, have consented to put all the weapons into his hands. Don't stop me again. The game will be played out, and the day of vengeance will dawn before long. I must wait. But I want to see you slip from the grasp of that devil of devils. Once more, go!"

Opal did not feel like detaining the strange man any longer.

She saw him crawl across the threshold with a final look back at her, and then the door shut, and he was gone.

A curiosity which she could not keep down took her to the window, and for several moments she gazed in silence at the object that passed over the ground like a wolf dragging a pair of broken legs to his den.

She wondered if he would be able to perform the journey unobserved, and when she thought of the man who had made himself master of No Man's Ground by his undaunted coolness and audacity she feared that the Crippled Croesus would be caught.

But Colonel Bluff was not seen.

Fortune seemed to favor his purpose, for he reached his quarters unobserved, and threw himself upon the cot with an exclamation of triumph.

"Under no other circumstances would I have told her a word!" he cried. "I have paid you back in part, Dun Duff. The maimed wolf yet possesses his teeth, and you must be careful if he does not outwind you!"

After awhile he dragged himself to the cabin door, which he opened, and looked out.

Beyond the Square he saw the open portal of Shasta Sam's saloon, and his eyes seemed to catch fire as he watched the spot a little while.

"It isn't much of a crawl—no further than it was to her," he muttered. "If I was sure he wouldn't be there I could reach the place and turn the tables. Yes, I could reverse the orders, and in a moment I could throw the pards of No Man's Ground on him like a pack of lions."

"Looking out, eh, Colonel?" cried a voice at that moment, and Colonel Bluff drew back from the figure which appeared at the door.

His face instantly became white, and the laugh that followed the salutation did not bring the color back.

Dun Duff had come!

"Well, the three hours are passing away," continued the cool-head, as he entered the cabin and leaned against the table, folding his arms and looking quietly down upon the man who had crept back to the cot. "They haven't made the slightest move as yet, and it looks like he intends to defy the code."

"Gideon Goldbar, you mean?" said Colonel Bluff.

"Of course. I gave them three hours to get away. Section 101 allows no aliens in camp nor anywhere within the domain. This man seems to want to test the code. Well, he can do so."

There was a quiet but a terrible emphasis in the last sentence which the cripple noticed.

"How much time has he left?"

"One hour."

"If he remains, what?"

"The code will be obeyed! I am master here. I have the men firmly at my back. You have proclaimed me Captain of the League, and that is enough for them. At the end of an hour I shall order Gideon Goldbar and his man under arrest, and to-morrow will see the corpses of the fools on the Plaza."

"You intend to show no mercy?"

"Why should I? I intend to rule! They do not know who they are dealing with. The sleuth from the South will die with his 'hand'

but half played out, and the trumps he has been holding back will fall from the fingers of the dead!"

Colonel Bluff looked up at the man, but said nothing.

"I may as well watch the time out here as elsewhere," Dun Duff went on. "It won't be long any more."

He drew a watch from below his belt and placed it open on the table under the lamp.

"I have marked the time exactly and I will work to the minute," he resumed, with a glance at Colonel Bluff. "By the way, Colonel, how much do you think is in the crypt?"

"I cannot say," answered the Sacramento Croesus, biting his lips.

"But you have ideas. You must know something about Boss Nevada's last report."

The dark eyes were again fastened upon him, and he could not avoid their gaze.

"I would have supposed you had seen for yourself ere this, Captain Duff."

"By Jove! I can't. Captain Nevada took with him the combination and the door is fast."

"You have tried it, then?"

"Yes," confessed Dun Duff. "I can get into it with the sledges of Satan's City, but I am in no hurry. Couldn't you approximate, Colonel?"

Colonel Bluff shut his eyes and kept them shut for some seconds.

"There ought to be a million," said he.

"No more than that!" cried the evil genius of the camp. "In these days a million is nothing. Come, come, Colonel. You have not worked this great bonanza for nothing. The crypt was made to hold more than the sum you name. There is more than that amount in it."

"Then have it so."

Dun Duff frowned and glared at the man who had shut his eyes again, and seemed to be counterfeiting sleep and said to himself:

"A million! Pish! There are more than five of them beyond the locked door of the secret bonanza mine. He ought to know that a lie will not serve him long. A lot of iron and a lock won't stand before me long when I want to push forward."

At this juncture he leaned toward the watch and consulted it an instant.

"Five minutes yet, Colonel," he announced, glancing at Colonel Bluff with a malicious grin. "If the aliens intend to obey the command they had better improve the time left."

"They have gone, no doubt."

"Do you think so?" cried Dun Duff as if he feared that the nabob's surmise might be the correct one. "I was thinking that the sleuth would be fool enough to test the code and the courage of the captain of No Man's Ground."

The minute hand on the polished dial soon ticked away the remaining minutes of the allotted time and when the last one had been told off, Dun Duff pocketed the watch and stepped back from the table.

"We will now see who is master here," said he, throwing a parting look over his shoulder as he reached the door. "Colonel, you need not disturb yourself. I am able to carry out the code. The pards of Satan City are at my back. By Jove! I like work o' this sort. You know that I shrink from nothing."

The eyes of the maimed millionaire watched him till he passed out, and then he shook his fist toward the door and ground his teeth.

"Oh for the legs I used to have!" he cried. "I'd give my wealth—my heart's blood to be the man I was twenty years ago—for a minute only. But I am what I am—the miserable victim of that demon's cunning! This must be the judgment of an avenging God!"

He dragged himself across the room with the help of the table. His hand caught the latch and jerked the door open.

"I can stop his game from where I am!" he exclaimed. "I can proclaim in a loud voice that Dun Duff is deposed, and that I am master of No Man's Ground. They can hear me across the Plaza. I see a crowd in front of Shasta Sam's. They know that the three hours have expired. Dun Duff, I am going to checkmate you if it costs me my life!"

"I thought you'd take a hand, Colonel!" hissed a voice that almost broke the nabob's hold on the door. "Don't be in a hurry to throw your card. If it costs your life, did you say? Go back to your shanty, and lift a hand before I get through with the detective and his pard, and it'll cost you more than that. You know me of old. You know Dun Duff is master of No Man's Ground, and woe to the man, great or small, who throws anything in his path!"

There were now two hands at Colonel Bluff's collar, and he was forced across the cabin and thrown without a show of gentleness upon the cot, when the man of plots walked off with a curse!

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE DETECTIVE'S NERVE.

If Dun Duff had not acted thus promptly his career as master of No Man's Ground might have come to a sudden termination.

"I know who I'm dealing with," he said to himself as he walked away confident that he had silenced the man left behind. "Colonel Bluff

has felt my hand before, and in a manner calculated to impress him as long as he lives. Intended to revoke my commission, did he? I guess he won't do it now."

Dun Duff crossed the Square to the crowd congregated in front of the saloon.

The clock ticking hoarsely among the shelves on the inside had proclaimed that the three hours of grace had expired, and the men were waiting for the new captain.

"Gentlemen, the time is up," remarked Dun, halting in front of the group.

"An' the aliens ar' here yet, cap'n," was the response.

Dun Duff looked toward Gideon Goldbar's cabin. There was a faint light in its one window.

"Are they there?" he asked.

"They war awhile ago."

A short silence followed.

"You know the code and its penalties," the cool-head presently observed. "You knew them before I became master here."

"We know 'em well."

"Then, yonder are men who have dared to disobey the mandates of No Man's Ground," and the dark hand of the speaker covered the shanty a few yards away. "You will follow me to duty. Come, pards of Shasta."

The figure of Dun Duff seemed to increase in stature when he walked off, and without looking back he knew he had the band at his heels.

"What is the penalty for disobeying Section 101, boys?" he asked, over his shoulder.

"Death!" answered a dozen voices.

"How administered?"

"That depends, cap'n," replied the man nearest Dun. "The code allows us to hang or to shoot, just as the occasion demands. There can be no trial for breaking Section 101."

"You are right. Aliens found on No Man's Ground after a proclamation convict themselves. Isn't that it?"

"They do."

The crowd tramped on without further conversation, and as they drew near the menaced shanty the light on the inside got brighter.

"Did you see that?" said some one.

"The light flaring up?"

"Yes."

"They are still there."

Half a minute later the door of the detective's abode opened, and a figure was seen.

Some of the men halted, but only for a second, for the stalwart figure at their head, and the band that rested on the top of a buckskin belt seemed to urge them on.

"Gideon Goldbar is in the door," went from mouth to mouth. "We are going to see work now. But what does the fellow mean? He had three hours in which to go away, but he played stubborn and stuck."

The shanty lamp was on the table behind the form in the doorway. The man himself was cast in silhouette on a background of light.

Dun Duff led his men to within five feet of the figure on the rough sill.

The two master spirits of the bonanza region—the detective and his prey—were face to face.

"We have come because the time has expired," began Dun Duff.

"I see you here."

"You heard the proclamation, Captain Goldbar?"

"Yes, I heard the crier who warned all aliens from Satan City within three hours."

"The proclamation came from the highest authority in this part of the country."

"Which means that it emanated from Captain Duff."

The coolness of this man was remarkable. He leaned against the door-frame with no sign of being armed, and with no friend in sight.

"You might have come before," he went on, addressing the crowd, though he looked particularly at their leader.

"You did not intend to obey the mandate from the first? Is that what you mean?"

"I obey all reasonable laws," was the response.

"What is this?"

"A code that does not contain one section founded on justice. It was written miles from here, and for the selfish ends of a man who is in this camp to-night trembling for his life under the thumb of an enemy."

Dun Duff knew what these words meant; but the men about him did not.

He looked at the man in the doorway and saw that he had turned his face to the light, and that he was looking at him with the calmness of a person his equal in everything, if not his better here and there.

"I do not acknowledge the authority that would enforce the blood-signed code of No Man's Ground," the detective suddenly went on.

"I appeal to no one. The gentlemen at your back, Captain Duff, are wondering still by what hocus-pocus you became master—stepping in a twinkling from the shadow of death to the throne. I admit that there are sudden transformations in this world, but this is one that surprises. Let us go down to Colonel Bluff and look into the matter. No! you and I will remain here while the men go down and investigate for themselves."

Dun Duff felt himself go back a step.

This would never do.

Let Colonel Bluff see the pards of No Man's Ground without his (Duff's) presence as a silencer, and there would be a revocation of an edict which might prove fatal to him.

No; anything but this.

"Captain Goldbar, you talk to gain time," he answered. "The men of Satan City have come to take you into custody under the code. Do you resist?"

The California detective left the door, and in a twinkling a quick stride had carried him across the space which separated him and Dun Duff.

"As I have said, I acknowledge no code like this one," and his hand fell on the desperado's pistol-arm, the fingers closing there while the eyes of the two men met. "Where I come from they have nothing like it."

"Where you come from? I suppose not!" laughed the usurper. "Will you tell these men where you came from?"

"If you will give an account of yourself to them, Captain Duff."

"Agreed! agreed!" exclaimed the miners, seeing in the scene before them something that promised to divert them from the shedding of human blood.

Dun Duff saw the detective's hand fall from his arm.

"It is no time for life yarns," said he.

"Not for yours, perhaps, Captain Duff."

"Nor for yours, Captain Velvet."

The new name, spoken for the first time in presence of the pards, produced a sensation. There was the craning forward of a number of bronzed necks, and the miners of the bonanza camp looked searching at Gideon Goldbar, wondering what he would do.

"You are right," responded he. "Since you have unmasked me to the men of No Man's Ground, permit me to return the compliment."

"There can be no parleying when Section 101 has been violated," came swift from Dun Duff's lips. "You talk for time. Where is your comrade, Captain Velvet?"

"Johnny Jumpup?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps he has fled because of the mandate."

"Then he had more discretion than his master."

"Just as you say. Dare you go with me, Captain Duff? Dare you command these men to remain behind and accompany me?"

"To Colonel Bluff?"

"Not to Colonel Bluff."

A singular look darting from the cool-head's eyes became fixed on Gideon Goldbar.

"I dare to go," he spoke, and the words seemed to come through his teeth. "Provided we go alone," he finished.

The detective placed himself at Dun Duff's side.

"Go back to Shasta's, and stir not from the place till I come back," cried Duff turning to the men, who stared in amazement at the detective. "I promise you that the Code of No Man's Ground shall not be broken with impunity. Now, Captain Velvet, the man you hate is at your service."

The wonder of the crowd was augmented when they saw the two men walking away together.

They drew into a close group and stared at the strange spectacle, and almost entirely in silence till their figures disappeared.

"We are to wait at Sam's," said some one, and the cry "To Sam's" being taken up, the band made a hasty return to the mountain bar.

Dun Duff and the detective passed to the edge of the camp.

Not more than ten audible words had passed between them since the making and the acceptance of the strange proposition.

"Now which way?" suddenly asked Duff.

"Straight ahead."

They went on down into the deep shadows where all was still.

"Ha! you have found the secret!" cried the man from the South, drawing back from what he knew was the mouth of the mine that contained the crypt with the iron door.

"Do I surprise you?" asked Mona's sleuth.

"You forget that I am a hunter of secrets."

Dun Duff leaned toward his rival as if to catch the triumphant smile which he thought must have followed his last sentence.

"Come; we are going on," resumed Captain Velvet.

"Into the mine?"

"Into the gold pit which has caught more than one victim."

"What do you mean?"

"Wait and see."

They entered the shaft in the mountain-side together.

Gideon Goldbar led the way, walking fearlessly through the darkness as if he did not fear the hand that followed him.

At length he reached the door of the crypt. He found the lamp on the stone shelf above it, and soon had a light.

"Hold it, captain," he said, putting the light into Dun Duff's hand.

As if under a spell the plotter obeyed.

The light fell squarely on the door, and the polished knob glittered wherever it was touched.

To Dun Duff's amazement the detective fell to work on the combination.

"You can't open that door. It is time wasted!" exclaimed Captain Duff.

"Who told you?"

"I have tried it for myself."

"You? So soon after becoming alcalde, captain?" laughed Gideon Goldbar. "I used to know these kind of locks like a boy knows his primer. Ah! the tumbler dropped then. Did you not hear it. Now, I think I have it."

At that moment the detective seized the bright knob with both hands and pulled back.

To Dun Duff's wonder the heavy door swung open, and as he fell back the lamp almost dropped from his hands!

CHAPTER XXXII.

SLEUTH AND COOL-HEAD.

THE two men looked at one another for a second.

Dun Duff could not drive the hue of astonishment from his face and there was a quiet smile at the detective's lips.

"How did you get the combination? I thought that was Captain Nevada's secret," exclaimed Duff at length.

"I have played with locks before," was the answer. "But come, captain. Are we going in to look at the treasure-room of No Man's Ground?"

"I am ready."

Gideon Goldbar stepped aside and pointed to the door.

Without more ado, the man from the South entered the crypt and soon had his companion at his heels.

The detective stopped at the door a moment, and when he rejoined him, he said:

"I have provided against the schemes of outsiders. The door may be shut, but it cannot be locked. We are safe now."

The two rivals went forward, the sleuth carrying the light so that it fell upon the walls, showing them here and there.

All at once Dun Duff came to a halt and uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"What is it, captain?"

"Did you know that inscription was here?" he cried, pointing to the wall before them. "Is that Boss Nevada's work?"

Gideon held the lamp above his head and the following moment he read half-aloud and half to himself words like these:

"The person called the Queen of Darkness is the wife of Colonel Bluff, the Crippled Croesus of Sacramento!"

Dan Duff gave vent to a bitter laugh when the sleuth reached the last word.

"That is not much of a revelation to us, I think, captain," he observed. "You have heard of the Queen of Darkness?"

"Yes."

"She is the person Boss Nevada raved about when he was out of his head."

"That is true. But who wrote that on the wall? Not the ex-master of Satan City, now no one knows where."

Dun Duff looked at the inscription.

"There is something under it—words written with a different colored stone. Your light doesn't shine on them just right as you hold it. A little more to the left—there!"

As Gideon shifted the lamp, Dun Duff leaned toward the wall, and with one hand on it, seemed to study a certain spot for a few seconds.

"My God! there has been death here!" he suddenly exclaimed, drawing back. "Listen to this, Captain Velvet," and turning to the stone again, he read:

"We three have been shut in here by some enemy on the outside. The noxious vapors that come up from somewhere are slowly killing us. The Tiger is nearly gone now. May the blight of heaven overtake the discoverer of No Man's Ground, and turn his gold to lead!"

LOLAS."

The detective looked about him with a cry he could not suppress, when Dun Duff reached the scrawled signature underneath the words.

"They said that Lolas and the two others had deserted," remarked the master of No Man's Ground, turning from the wall. "On the contrary, they are here."

"But where?"

"Let us see."

Once more the two men were going deeper into the crypt.

Suddenly the detective stopped and swept his light before his face.

"The runaways are here," he smiled, looking up into his companion's face.

On the ground before them, thrown together as it were, lay the bodies of three men. Their bronze faces had got a swarthier hue, and their hands were clinched like the hands of men in the death agony.

"This one is Lolas," said Dun Duff, touching the uppermost body with his finger. "The others I cannot separate."

"Entombed alive! After writing his curse on the wall, Lolas must have staggered back here to die. There is something in the fellow's hand."

Dun Duff caught the blackened hand and pried the fingers open.

Something dropped out and rolled at his feet. He picked it up and held it toward the light.

"It's some of the wealth of No Man's Ground!" he cried, for the detective saw that the find was a nugget of gold whose shape told that it had passed through the mountain mint, wherever that was.

Upon one of its sides were the letters "Col. B. B." which they knew stood for the Croesus of California.

Beyond the men huddled together in violent death were the remains of a fire. The smoke had ascended to the ceiling and colored it, but no vestiges of its smell remained.

"Shall we see all?" asked Dun Duff. "This is the treasury of No Man's Ground."

"Let us see all," was the reply.

"After that, what?"

There was no answer.

The light was falling upon the faces of both men, and it seemed to reveal that their thoughts were the same.

At any rate, Dun Duff looked at the nugget he still held and then tossed it above his head.

"I guess we're all here for this stuff, eh, captain?" he laughed. "You say that you are Mona's sleuth-hound, that you want to put the dagger together again and to place it in her hands whole. After all, the hunt means a fortune; it means the possession of No Man's wealth. Is it not true?"

"As you say, it means gold; but it has a deeper significance than that. Mona, of Sacramento, wants her own more than money. What to her, nearly blind and cruelly wronged, is the wealth of the world?"

"You forgot the other woman."

"The Queen of Darkness?"

"Yes. You forgot that the writing on the wall of this death crypt calls her Colonel Bluff's wife. What think you of that?"

There was a cold sneer at Dun Duff's lips.

"His wife, as you say," answered the detective. "As Mona's sleuth, I have run down more trails than one. I have discovered what you have doubtless known for years—that Colonel Bluff's marriage to Inez, the Guadalupe beauty, was a false one, that when he saw Mona he went to her."

Captain Velvet looked at the man before him and noticed his sinister countenance.

"Go on, captain; you are doing very well," grinned Dun Duff.

"You know that, shortly after Colonel Bluff's infatuation for Mona, who knew nothing about Inez, Inez disappeared. She was seized one night by a number of masked men, who took her on horseback into the mountains, from which time she has been dead to the world. Then came the tragedy of Bonanza Ranch, which opened Mona's eyes to the iniquities of her husband. The masked man who daggered Colonel Bluff and left him a cripple for life by severing the cords of his limbs, thought he had left nothing undone. The dagger that broke in the nabob's body the last stroke, left him a point which he has to-day, Mona has the rest of the blade; but ever since that eventful night the hilt has been missing."

Dan Duff, who was standing near the wall during this recital, leaned against it quietly folding his arms and looked at his companion.

"You've kept the trail well, captain," he smiled. "Nothing seems left but the finding of the dagger-bilt."

"And the child of Mona and Colonel Bluff, who was taken from her soon after the tragedy."

"Ho! I had forgotten her. I wonder where she is!"

"Stand there and say that, if it pleases you, Captain Duff," responded the detective. "You know where she is. You know that you could go from this crypt straight to the child of the woman who waits in the dark room."

Dun Duff shrugged his shoulders.

"It seems that we are understanding one another," laughed he. "Captain, you are here to find the girl, to piece the dagger and to throw the wealth of No Man's Ground into Mona's lap."

There was no response.

"You will want to denounce me to the men of No Man's Ground. This will be the next card you throw."

"I have not said so."

"No, you have not said so," was the echo. "You do not need to say so. I know your mission almost as well as you know it yourself."

Did the detective read what was about to take place in the eyes that looked into his with all the rising hatred of a tiger's?

Did he see the sudden change of countenance from pale to red and back again, and read thereon the fierce determination of a ruffian who saw his game in danger?

"Captain Velvet, this world is too big for both of us to win in!" suddenly cried Dun Duff. "I must congratulate you on your success thus far. I think one of us ought to drop out of the drama. In cases of this kind the weakest goes to the wall. If I am the weakest, there is no other place for me. Look out, Captain Velvet, slenth of the tigress in the dark!"

The next instant the figure of Dun Duff, agile

as a cat, leaped from the stone wall of the crypt, and the lamp falling from the detective's hand threw its expiring light upon two men struggling for the final stakes of the great California game.

The sleuth had brought Dun Duff to the treasury to show him the wealth there and to tell him, away from the men over whom he had obtained a mastery, that he had not hunted for Mona in vain.

The light went out almost as soon as the lamp struck the ground, and in a twinkling the cavern was wrapped in darkness.

The eye of the owl could hardly have seen the two figures as they swayed back and forth over the floor of the cavern. They were the forms of men in deadly combat, hand-to-hand in the Stygian chamber, now against the wall, now ten feet away.

All at once they broke loose.

The detective was thrown to the ground by the suddenness of the separation, and when he recovered he put out his hand and touched solid stone.

Panting over his struggle he leaned against the wall and recovered.

Where Dun Duff was he did not know.

If he could have pierced the darkness he would have seen the bonanza plotter creeping down the same wall with his boots in his hand.

Dun Duff held his breath as he proceeded.

He had nothing but the wall itself to guide him.

At last he reached the half-closed door of the crypt, but ere he went further he looked back and listened.

He recollects that the detective had said that he had fixed the lock so that the iron portal could not be shut tight, as some one had shut it on the three men dead in the cavern.

With his fingers he worked in the dark till he found a little steel bar which he moved from left to right.

"This is the agent he brought into play," he exclaimed. "Now, Captain Velvet, I have you in a trap of your own setting."

In another moment he was beyond the door.

If any one could have seen his eyes at that moment they would have fell back in horror.

Suddenly he caught the heavy door with both hands and swung it shut.

There was a click, and it was solid.

"Now, by the heavens! I am master of No Man's, and the game is mine!" he cried.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"WE WANT YOU!"

DUN DUFF left the mine of the crypt with the keenest triumph he had ever known knocking at his heart.

He had shut in among the treasures of No Man's Ground the detective who had followed him from Sacramento to the shades of death.

He could now go back to the man he had mastered, to Colonel Bluff the cripple left in the cabin too much under his thumb to betray him now.

What would he tell the pards of Satan City concerning Gideon Goldbar?

Ah! he would attend to that.

The cool-head went almost straight to the maimed Croesus. He looked in at the window, but the lights were out and he saw no one.

"I must see what has become of him," he muttered. "The man can crawl and his infirmities have not injured his head."

Dun Duff touched the latch gently and went in.

Though he could not see any one he was sure that he was not the only person in the cabin.

If he could have pierced the darkness he would have seen the very man he was looking for stretched on a cot against the wall.

Colonel Bluff was not asleep. His eyes were wide-open and his ears were on the alert.

"Colonel, I've a bit of news," spoke Dun Duff leaning forward, one of his hands touching the table which it had found by chance.

"What is it?"

There was a singular eagerness in the tones heard in the dark, but they belonged to the Nabob of Sacramento.

"The alien has gone away."

A momentary silence followed this piece of information.

"Gideon Goldbar, eh?" asked Colonel Bluff.

"The detective—Mona's sleuth."

"Where is his pard? You have said that but one has gone away."

"The pard is nothing. The master was the man we wanted out of the road."

"When did he go?"

"A while ago."

"On horseback?"

"He walked."

Dun wondered if Colonel Bluff believed this, and at that particular moment he would have given a good deal for a glimpse of his face.

Did he know that he and the detective had gone away together? Had the pards of Satan City—the men whom he had ordered to Shasta Sam's to await his return—told him about the parley and the failure to enforce the code?

"What time is it, captain?" came the voice of Colonel Bluff once more through the darkness.

"It is past midnight."

The next minute a match flashed up in Dun Duff's face and he fell back from the sight he saw revealed.

The face on the cot was covered with blood, and the hand that held the burning stick was also red.

"In the name of Tartarus, who has been here!" cried the plotter of No Man's Ground, darting forward.

"Can't you guess?"

It was a hideous grin by which these words were accompanied.

"One would say that you had fallen into the clutches of a lioness," Dun said. "I left orders that you should not be disturbed; but somebody has disobeyed."

"There is one who is bound by no commands. She came when I was asleep, and when I came to my senses I was in her power."

"You mean the Queen of Darkness."

"Ah, Captain Duff, you need not ask that question. Touch this match to the lamp before it goes out. There! now take the stool at the table, the one she must have overturned. Colonel Bluff, the victim of the coolest plot ever hatched in the brain of man, is at the end of the life-coil. Look me in the eye, Dun Duff; I still call you by the name you wear here, though you have another. Do you know whether Opal is gone?"

"Gone! the girl?" ejaculated Duff, starting. "She dare not go. I have issued orders that no citizen shall quit camp without my consent."

"And I have begged her in the name of God to go."

The two men looked straight at one another while Croesus spoke. The words were couched in firm tones, and one of his hands caught the cover with an unnatural grip.

"Yes," he went on, "I told her to go—to go at once. I besought her to brave your authority, and I told her the truth."

"What was that?"

"That her mother was Mona, the woman who set this Captain Velvet on the trail, and that I am her father."

"What did she say?"

"She looked at me like one mad."

"I would think so. And did not believe you, of course."

"She believed at last. I know she did," was the answer. "But her eyes, her look, said that she would not go."

Colonel Bluff fell back exhausted, his bloody face getting new terror in the lamplight, and with a hurried glance at the door, Dun Duff followed him up.

"I have been to the crypt!" cried he.

"Inside?"

"Yes. You have no idea of the wealth that is there. The tomb holds millions."

"The tomb? Why do you call it that?"

"Because that is just what it is. It contains three dead men now, and there is a prisoner cooped up in it who is as good as dead."

The Cripple of Sacramento looked at his torturer, but did not speak.

"I saw there an inscription on one of the walls, written by Lolas or one of his friends. It gives a name for the Queen of Darkness, this fury who attacked Boss Nevada in the mine and dethroned his reason."

"Well?"

"It calls her Colonel Bluff's wife!"

Dun Duff dropped his voice to a whisper. "You need not whisper it, Captain Duff. It is a falsehood!" exclaimed Colonel Bluff. "That woman never was my wife. Mona, the discarded—Mona, the one who sends out sleuth after sleuth to find the last child, is the only woman who ever bore that relation to me. I own her here. I could tell her that I am the person who lived a lie to her—"

"But you will never do that. Remember! never do that," hissed Dun Duff, his hand falling upon the nabob's shoulder.

"You will see to that, eh?"

"I will see to that!"

"Then, by the eternal laws of justice! you shall never reap the fruits of the game for which you have played. Captain Velvet may never get to piece the broken dagger whose last work was the severing of my leaders, maiming me for life; but I have baffled the man who drove the keen blade home."

"You have, eh! How?"

Instead of recoiling to the wall from the man who seemed to dart at him like an eagle, Colonel Bluff leaned forward, and sent the last words toward his enemy like bullets from a six-shooter.

"I was left for dead by the woman who has lived among the mines of No Man's Ground as the Queen of Darkness," he resumed. "Long ago I had her abducted by a lot of men at the head of whom was Captain Nevada. The bargain was that she was to be taken somewhere and disposed of, and that I was never to know the truth till at Nevada's death. I took it for granted that they finished her. I trusted in the man I had commissioned for that purpose. What, then, was my surprise when I opened the sealed packet taken by Norgan from the supposed corpse of Captain Nevada to find that she was still alive. That is what brought me up here, tied to my horse, with every move infi-

agony. The woman—Inez—lives, I say. My hands and my face attest this. As I have said she was here, and her last words, ere she left—words which she thought she was speaking to a corpse—were: 'I go now to finish the woman who came between.' Captain Duff, you have said that I should go back to Sacramento before to-morrow. Will you get my horse?"

Colonel Bluff caught the coverings of the cot again and took a long breath.

"A horse? You had better be thinking about a grave," laughed Duff without pity.

"The horse first. Ah! coward, you dare not tie me in the saddle. You are afraid of the man you maimed for life and yet you are the acknowledged master of No Man's Ground."

"But you have boasted that you had baffled me."

A wild look crossed the nabob's face.

"I have," said he. "Even now your authority is worth nothing. Listen."

Dun Duff sprung to the door and listened there a few moments.

"What have you done?" he exclaimed looking toward the man regarding him from the cot.

"You will know if you wait there long enough."

"You have revoked your orders."

"I have."

The tiger band of the California sport went quickly to his hip and closed on a revolver there.

"I have done this and more. I have made Norgan master of No Man's Ground. It may have been the last official act of my life, but I assure you, man of many names, that it was well done."

Beyond the cabin door, out in the starlight and toward the Square, were voices and the tramp of many feet.

A grim smile came over Colonel Bluff's face as he listened and heard them all.

"So you gave my place to the young assayer—to this man Norgan—to the person who refused it when first offered during the ride up here from Sacramento," suddenly cried Dun Duff.

The nabob nodded.

"Do you know who he is?"

The speaker went half-way toward the occupant of the cot to throw the question into his teeth.

"I question if you would place in his hands the keys of No Man's Ground if you knew whose blood courses through his veins. Norgan is the son of the woman you hate. He is the child of Inez, the Queen of Darkness."

A startling cry was heard as Colonel Bluff went back, his gaze riveted on the man before him as if he had seen an apparition.

"Her son?" he exclaimed. "Do you say that, Dun Duff?"

"Ay, and I will prove it."

"No, no!"

And the nabob put out his hands as if to keep back the proof.

"Whether you want the proof or not, know that Inez was a widow when you met her. She married very young a man who—"

"They are out yonder, captain," interrupted Colonel Bluff, throwing a glance toward the door. "You can tell me all after the interview. Attend to the gentlemen of No Man's Ground."

Biting his lip, Dun Duff turned back to the door.

His hand was once more at his revolver, and his dark face was a study of cool defiance.

"Have I played my hand for nothing?" he mentally exclaimed. "Is this the end of Dun Duff's big play for millions—death before a mob of Shasta toughs?"

He opened the door and looked out.

The flood of light that left the cabin as he performed this action, showed him the solid crowd of men who stood within a few feet of the shanty.

One look was enough to tell him that the crisis had come.

"What is it, gentlemen?" he asked.

The answer was three words spoken by twenty men at once:

"We want you!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

NORGAN STEPS IN.

A GRIM smile played over the face of the man stretched on the cot along the wall.

He looked beyond the figure in the open door and saw the stalwarts who had just spoken the ominous words.

"We want you!"

The demand meant the overthrow of one man's hopes and schemes. It meant, too, that the mask had been torn off, and that Satan City, all of it, knew that Dun Duff was but playing a game of grab and hold.

If Colonel Bluff, clutching the covering of the bed, and with his eyes riveted upon his enemy, could have looked into the face that confronted the mob, he might have trembled for the success of his bold play.

Dun Duff seemed to look the crowd over with the coolness of a desperado who was used to perilous situations.

To show a sign of weakness would be fatal; to confront the men and laugh at their demand might prove no better in the end.

What would he do?

"So you want me, gentlemen?" Dun asked, a smile even in that hour visible under the ends of his dark mustache. "I stand before you. Dun Duff always stands in his own shoes. Why am I wanted?"

"Don't you know, Captain Duff?" came the answer. "You are playing a game."

"For what?"

The question confused the crowd.

"Against the Colonel and for the secret."

The plotter stepped back, glidingly, but with caution, and in a moment he was at Colonel Bluff's side.

The crowd moved to the door.

"Colonel, they say I am playing against you," said he, glancing down at the nabob. "I am one of your creations. The echoes of your proclamation making me master of No Man's Ground have hardly ceased to vibrate the air. Do you revoke the order?"

There was a silent leaning forward on the part of the pards of the bonanza land.

Another crisis had come. Colonel Bluff had unmasked the man before him.

While Dun Duff was at the crypt with Gideon Golbar he had crawled across the Plaza and denounced the impostor to the pards. Going further than this he had declared the seat of the usurper vacant and had installed Norgan, the young assayer in his place.

"It is for you to say, Colonel," continued Dun. "Am I to hold my place or am I an impostor?"

Twice the crippled millionaire tried to speak, and twice he failed. He grew white, and his lips twitched as blood came and went in them.

"Talk it out, Colonel!" came from the impatient men. "We are for you to the bitter end, and you own us now as you did when we took the oath and swore to the code."

With a desperate effort which all could see Colonel Bluff clutched the low posts of the cot and raised himself up.

The left hand of Dun Duff was within a few inches of his throat, and the glance he got when he looked up into his enemy's face meant more than words could have spoken.

"It is now or never!" mentally ejaculated the nabob. "I have but little life left. The Queen of Darkness nearly took it all with her when she went away. I want to go back to Sacramento—to throw myself between the Mexican lioness and Mona. To do this I must play with this man. If I denounce him here I will fall against the wall with a bullet in my head."

All this went through Colonel Bluff's brain like a succession of thoughts.

"Gentlemen—boys—I must think a little. I don't know what I have done. My brain has been in a strange, mad whirl. Since sundown I have been attacked—cut by a creature who has gone off to do another desperate deed. Give me a breathing spell. A little time."

The men looked at one another. They were simply amazed.

"Time, Colonel!" they growled, on every side. "What did you tell us awhile ago? Didn't you have your head then?"

"I don't know. But I must have time now. This is no child's play. I feel a fire in my head. I am full of pains. Wherever the knife of Inez pierced, I feel a cold thrill. For God's sake, men of No Man's Ground, give your Colonel time."

Victory, clear and undisguised, shone from Dun Duff's eyes.

He thought he had won, and he ascribed his triumph to his presence so near the man who had weakened.

The secret of No Man's Ground was not yet lost.

After this the crowd went back, but it was with reluctance.

It continued to recede till Shasta Sam's place held it once more. Then the storm pent up in bronzed bosoms broke out unchecked.

"The Colonel is either crazy or he is under the thumb of the man in the shanty," cried a man who stepped to the middle of the room and faced the gang. "If crazy, we must constitute ourselves his guardians and take matters into our hands. The time has come when No Man's Ground has two captains. Where is Norgan?"

As if in answer to the question the assayer appeared in the doorway, and had every eye in an instant.

He was cool and collected, and those who looked at him hardest saw how firmly his lips were wedded as he came forward.

"Do you enforce the code, Norgan?" asked the man who had just harangued the crowd. "We have two captains, now—two, when the law says distinctly that there shall be but one."

"I have accepted the appointment," came from the assayer in clear tones. "I acknowledge no authority by the man who holds the fort up at Lolas's cabin. He is a man with cool cards in his hands. Dun Duff, eh? He is a man with more names than that, and the secret of No Man's Ground is in his hands to-night."

"To what extent?"

"He has been to the mine. He has passed through 'the office' to the crypt. He knows where the bonanza is, and what he knows he will hold at the risk of his life."

"What is his spell over the Colonel?"

"It is some mysterious power in which fear on one side and courage on the other play their part. Dun Duff is Dun Duff the cool desperado, the man of nerve, the dead shot to the end. I don't overestimate the man, gentlemen. You have called on me to recollect that what I assume is opposed to a cut-throat of this kind. I would not forget this if I could. To estimate Dun Duff otherwise is to lose the hand we must hold against him. You stand by me, gentlemen?"

"To Norgan to the death!" was the answer, which, though it came from twenty tongues, seemed to be the decision of but one man.

"Colonel Bluff wants to go to Sacramento," continued Norgan. "He was attacked where he is by the Queen of Darkness, who dethroned Boss Nevada's reason by her assault in the mine. She left him for dead, and now she is on the trail South for the purpose of tigerishly murdering Mona, the discarded wife, who, half-blind, sits in a dark room, biding the time for vengeance. It is too long a story to tell here at this time. I will not uncover certain secrets which cannot remain secrets much longer. No Man's Ground must be purged of the enemy who has cursed it with his presence. Colonel Bluff is no saint, gentlemen. A thousand years of penance could not obliterate his past, but we must stand by him as between him and the general foe."

If the man bending at that very moment over the Croesus of No Man's Ground could have heard these words clearly enunciated by his younger rival, he might have left his patient's side, and a figure on vengeance bent might have crossed the Plaza to the door of the drinking den.

Norgan held up his hand to enforce silence when he had finished.

"The Colonel cannot go to Sacramento in his condition," he went on. "The case is urgent. Some one must go. The Mexican tigress is in the saddle. Even now she has put miles between her and our camp. Hatred drives the spur into the rowels of the horse she has taken, and, believing that she has left behind the corpse of the man who deceived her by a false marriage, she goes to kill the woman who is his wife. Mona, of Sacramento, who is the wife and mother, and the woman who sent Captain Goldbar out, does not know that this hell-armed Nemesis is approaching."

"Where is Gideon Goldbar? He did not come back with Dun Duff after leading him away. Did the foes fight somewhere in the dark?"

"We cannot pretend to answer that question now," replied Norgan, turning to the man who had spoken. "Gideon's friend, Johnny Jumpup, is now trying to solve the mystery. We must deal with others. I was saying that the murderer riding toward Sacramento must be baffled if it can be done. There is a person on her trail. That one could not be held back when it was known, as it was only lately discovered that Inez, the Queen of Darkness, was in the saddle."

"Who is the trailer, Captain Norgan?"

"It is Opal!"

A shout of surprise greeted this revelation.

"Woman against woman!" some one said.

"It is just as it should be in this case," rejoined the assayer. "Opal's hand is the very one to save Mona from the toils of the Nemesis now on the trail. I need not tell you why."

"You need not, captain. We believe that Opal is riding to her mother's rescue."

Norgan met the answer with a smile.

"The girl may fail, but she will do what she can," he resumed. "She rides the horse that brought Colonel Bluff up, and she knows the trail as well as does the tigress who rides ahead of her. We all send our hopes to Sacramento with Opal, of No Man's Ground. No man could follow Inez with the spirit that animates her."

At that moment a man opened a cabin door and looked out.

Seeing no one, he walked into the starlight and passed through it to a small cabin at the door of which he knocked.

There was no response.

A moment afterward he opened the door and looked into a darkened room.

"He says he told her to get away from here?" the man said, in audible tones, though he spoke to himself alone. "Is she gone? I did not see Norgan the lover in the crowd when it faced me before Lola's shanty. Can it be that they are runaways, and that when I am about to throw down all the trumps, and, in spite of the odds against me, rake in the big stakes? By the wings of the dragon! I will know where she is."

The speaker showed the face of Dun Duff when he turned away.

Was there ever a cooler man?

He looked toward the Plaza and across it to the light that showed the location of Shasta Sam's saloon.

"What devilment goes on there, I wonder? Have the pards recovered from their defeat?"

All at once the door swung in and a figure came out.

Dun Duff seemed to watch it with a good deal of curiosity as it came toward him, crossing the Square and passing under the boughs of the big tree.

It stopped at the trunk and seemed to lean forward for a moment.

By and by it moved on again and the fighter of odds walked over to the tree.

He found a piece of paper attached to the bark, and when with an eager smile he struck a match he read Norgan's assumption of the mastership of No Man's Ground.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE RAT IN THE TRAP.

SHUT up in a strange death-trap as he was, Captain Velvet was not slow to realize the full horror of his situation.

He had groped his way to the door of the crypt only to find it immovable, and to discover that he was shut in as Lolas and his companions had been by the hand of Boss Nevada.

After awhile he went back, stumbling through the darkness, and fell at length upon the three dead men on the floor.

He thought of Johnny Jumpup, but as the pard did not know where he was he would be likely to take a wrong trail if he were not driven from Satan City, or finished by the authority that now dominated there.

The detective had not forgotten the writing left on the wall by Lolas. He remembered that the three men had been suffocated by noxious vapors that arose from somewhere, and tried to conjecture how long he could last in the same place.

But not for a moment did the detective think of despairing. It was not his intention to give up the struggle at the outset. He had an oath that would have nerved him to breast still greater odds.

Striking a match, he found the lamp which had been lost in the struggle with Dun Duff, and with this for his guide, he began the fight for liberty.

The ghastly dead men were left behind, and Captain Velvet was soon exploring the treasure crypt of No Man's Ground.

All at once he drew back from a suffocating odor that seemed to come up through the ground at his feet.

As he stood there his flame flickered and went out as if some hand had stolen up from below and snuffed it.

It was some time before he could proceed, and then he went forward with a head that seemed to swim with a singular dizziness.

He found himself in a little time before a wall, at the foot of which lay several iron sledges and picks.

"Can it be that Lolas and his friends tried to break through here?" exclaimed the detective.

The wall bore signs of recent attack, and Mona's sleuth found traces of man on the floor among the dust and bits of rock which the workmen had loosened.

Instinctively he picked up one of the sledges and struck the wall a heavy blow.

The sound startled him.

"The wall is not thick!" exclaimed he; "there is a chamber beyond this one. The imprisoned pards left their job too soon."

Convinced of this, the detective set his lamp down and attacked the wall in earnest.

He wondered if his blows were heard as he made them, but this thought did not deter him in the least.

There was no escape by the closed door of the crypt. The forcing of the wall seemed the only chance before him, and that it might prove of no avail the intrepid detective well knew.

For more than an hour, with few intermissions for breath and rest, the man of nerve stood ankle-deep in broken pieces of wall, and hammered away with the strength and determination of a giant.

The lamp on the floor threw up a sickly light which cast the grotesque shadow of the sleuth on the wall, and all the while the blows of his sledge rung throughout the death crypt.

At last he threw down the hammer with a mad cry.

The work appeared futile.

He picked up the lamp and held it close to his work.

He had made a good deal of progress, for the repeated strokes had cracked the wall in various places and the broken pieces lay everywhere.

As he rested, a puff of air from the darkness behind caused him to start.

"The bellows of the fiend somewhere beneath is at work again!" he cried. "The vapors are rising, too. They must have met Lolas and his pards at work here, just as they are meeting me now."

Then he seized the sledge again and sprung at the wall.

"It is better to die like a man if one must die!" broke over his lips. "I am convinced that the next ten minutes will settle this matter. The wall has yielded; the sound tells me that I am nearly through. But what lies beyond? Another tomb, perhaps?"

Once more the blows filled the cavern, with the lamp on the floor and the Sacramento detective stripped to the waist working for life.

Suddenly a piece of rock broke from the wall and bounding away struck the lamp and extinguished it.

Captain Velvet threw the banner down, and bent forward. He found in the darkness an opening that sent a thrill through his frame.

He thrust his hand on till it touches nothing!

It was impossible to keep back a cry!

A lot of new air rushed into the crypt. It touched the detective's cheeks and gave him more hope than he had had before.

Going back, he found his lamp of tin, touched the wick with a match, and then pushed the light and his head into the opening.

A larger piece of the rock than he had thought, had broken off, and he had no difficulty in putting his head and even his shoulders into the new cavern.

For several minutes Captain Velvet stood thus vainly trying to explore with the meager means at his disposal the space beyond.

At length he picked up a piece of the battered wall and threw it into the darkness. Its fall told him that he was not over ten feet from a floor, and he guessed that he had broken into another chamber of the secret mine of No Man's Ground.

"I am going to the end of this. I have promised Mona to go to the end!" cried he. "The cool-head who holds the cards now thinks me out of the way, but he may discover that Gideon Goldbar has not thrown up his hand."

Suiting action to his words the detective forced his body through the opening and hung for a second along the wall in the dark.

He had attached the lamp to his person so as to be able to use it in the venture at hand.

When he dropped he seemed to be falling into an immeasurable abyss, and when he struck he staggered back and fell against a wall that bristled with roughness.

"So far good enough!" ejaculated Captain Velvet. "Out of the crypt into—I don't know what. I will now see what regions I have found."

He lit his lamp again and as the blaze illuminated the place he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

Before him were a few objects which told that the small chamber had at one time had a tenant.

On one of the walls, smoother than the one against which he had fallen, he found written these words:

"It is a long waiting for the hour, but it will strike one of these days. Fate will bring him to me, for when Captain Nevada is dead, the message will be taken South, and then he will come."

With such sentences before him, could Captain Velvet doubt whose hand had been there?

The Queen of Darkness had written the words on the wall—Inez, the woman who had attempted Colonel Bluff's life, and who at that very hour was spurring over the mountain-trail to spring like a tigress upon the half-blind creature, Mona the discarded, who was waiting for justice in the dark.

The detective read the words again, then he explored the cavern enough to convince himself that the Queen of Darkness was not a myth.

To find an outlet from the place was the detective's next move, and in this he was successful.

He was in the great gold-yielding mine of No Man's Ground.

He had found the secret bonanza which Colonel Bluff's pards and slaves had guarded so well before, and whose riches had made the crypt an underground treasure-house. On every side his light showed him evidences of wealth. The rocks which he picked up now and then were tested by weight, and proved their value.

The California sleuth went from corridor to corridor.

"All this will belong to Mona if I win," thought he, and then he shut his teeth and said through them: "I came up here to win—to piece the dagger and find the lost."

When he felt the fresh air of night in his face, he fell back, put out his lamp, and then went forward again.

Once more he stood under the stars of No Man's Ground.

He had passed the door of the crypt, and had stopped a moment there to see that it was as solid as the rock in which it was set.

A smile for Dun Duff's cunning came to his lips when he passed on.

Captain Velvet found the camp as quiet as if every eye in it was closed in slumber.

But Satan City was not asleep.

If he had come a little sooner he would have seen Opal, well mounted, set out for Sacramento, with Inez the avenger riding ahead to a crime that burned like a flame of Tartarus in her bosom.

If he had been a little earlier he might have seen Opal, well mounted, set out for Sacramento, with Inez the avenger riding ahead to a crime that burned like a flame of Tartarus in her bosom.

But the wall of the crypt had kept him at bay too long. It had resisted too well his sledges and his determination.

Captain Velvet crossed the Plaza, attracted perhaps by the little lighted window in Shasta Sam's trap.

He drew near enough to see that a group of men were at the counter, and he made out that they were some of the pards in close consultation.

While he looked he became aware that he was watched by some one.

And he was.

Barely ten feet away stood a man, bent forward in his eagerness, and with his eyes riveted upon the detective.

"So he has come back. I think I can find an ally in that man. He is cool and collected. His mission here is no longer a guarded secret. He can't win without our consent, and I want his advice, and may be, his strength."

These thoughts passing through the brain of the watcher took him toward the detective, and while he looked at him with his hand at the trigger of a half-drawn revolver, he was approached without sign of fear.

"You are Captain Goldbar, Mona's sleuth," were the words the detective heard. "Opal has told me all she knows about you, and you will not be betrayed by me in a single thought. As you have been absent for a time you may not know the latest move. The real crisis is at hand. It is Dun Duff or the code. I am Norgan, and on yon tree I have posted my proclamation as master of No Man's Ground. Colonel Bluff has revoked the command which created Dun Duff such. He has placed me at the head of affairs, but the enemy holds his ground."

"Where is he?"

"He was with the Colonel a moment ago. The camp has determined to stand by me, and the move is to be made at daylight."

"What is it to be?"

"We are going to carry out the last section of the code. It has never been carried out in this camp. It is the section which gives us authority to call a usurper out and shoot him dead in his tracks."

The two men looked at one another in silence a full minute after Norgan's words.

"He may beat the code and all of you," answered the detective.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE TURN OF THE TIDE.

YES, Dun Duff was still with the man over whom a short time before he had had unlimited influence.

The two men were the only occupants of the little cabin of which Colonel Bluff had taken possession on his arrival in camp.

The Croesus of Sacramento had been terribly stabbed by the woman who had crept from the mines to assault him in the dark, but he could look at Dun Duff with an eye full of fire, and his voice was strong.

"Colonel," said the desperado man, seeming to lean nearer as he spoke. "Do you know that your slaves had just got through hanging a man according to the code, when I first reached camp?"

"Yes, Norgan told me coming up."

"The victim called himself Mark Moline. Burrell, the Rolling Stone, got possession of the man's beard, expecting to find a bonanza in it."

"Well?"

"He found, instead, a paper wrapped in oiled silk and protected otherwise. It was a strange place to carry a secret, eh, Colonel?"

Colonel Bluff replied with an approving smile.

"You are guessing that the secret paper revealed Mark Moline's identity," Dun Duff went on.

"You think so, too."

"Well, we are not mistaken. The secret, and not gold-dust, was what Burrell got for his pains. Mark Moline was one of your old acquaintances."

"One of mine?" echoed the nabob.

"Yes."

"Name him."

"He was the Mad Monte of other days."

Colonel Bluff passed his hand across his forehead.

"Can't you think?" asked Duff. "Don't you recollect the man who sold you for a song the secret of No Man's Ground? He was compelled to sell, I think, for you had him in a ten-by-twelve room, and there was a cocked six-shooter at his head. Come, come, Colonel! You have thought for many years that Mad Monte was dead. When he came up here to see how your slaves were getting along, they nabbed him, under the code, and choked him to death at the tree. His wife and children are in destitute circumstances, but he refused to locate them to the mob that took his life. You ought to make things even before long. Don't you think so, Colonel?"

The man lying on the cot looked for a moment into the face almost touching his own, and his lips twitched several times before he spoke.

"No!" he cried. "What I have goes to Mona and her child. Where is Opal, as they call her here?"

"Never mind the girl. I am talking for Mad Monte's family now."

"He sold me the secret, and swore to keep his distance."

"Yes—with a pistol at his head. But poverty sent him out into the world again."

"Will you make reparation?" asked Dun Duff when he had watched him awhile.

"I make nothing over to them. Mona first, then the child. Dun Duff, where is the handle of the dagger that maimed me for life the night the masked man stood over me and struck like a thug? I have the point, Mona has the rest of the blade. Now, where is the handle?"

Dun Duff's hand disappeared in his bosom, and when it came out it held a small package, with which he bent over the cot.

"It is here," said he, speaking in cool triumph as his eyes seemed to get a mad glitter. "For this link the man known as Gideon Goldbar came up here as Mona's sleuth. See, colonel; the blade is broken off close to the hilt. I haven't carried this souvenir of that one night ever since. It was in the shop of Mardoni, the Italian pawnbroker of Sacramento, till I came to No Man's."

The gaze of the Crippled Croesus remained fixed on the dagger-hilt while Dun Duff permitted it to lie in the hollow of his hand.

"You wielded that blade like a devil once," he grated at last, looking up into the face above the cot.

"Did I?" was the laughing rejoinder. "Colonel, we have been enemies all our lives. You have rolled in wealth; I have supped at the table of poverty, but always with an eye on you. I have waited for my time; I have held back till No Man's Ground is worth millions. It once belonged to Mark Moline. In reality, it belongs to his family to-day; but I am the owner of the winning hand. I am the Croesus of Shasta."

At this juncture the cabin door was opened.

Both men looked toward the threshold.

"Is the gentleman ready?" asked a voice.

Dun Duff stepped back and turned to the speaker.

"There are two of us here," answered he.

"I address Captain Duff. Is he ready?"

"For what?"

"For the decision of the conference under the code of the country."

Dun Duff looked at Colonel Bluff and saw the smile of pleasure that was fast spreading over his face.

"Where is the conference?" he cried.

"It is in session at Sam's."

"I am ready!" and then he stepped toward the cot and bent hastily over the man there.

"I am going to face the mob. I shall play my last hand, which will win. Men have hearts: they will turn against you when they hear the story of Mark Moline and his cheated family. You have but a few hours left of life. You can't recover from the wounds given by the Queen of Darkness, your Mexican mistress. When I come back I may have at my heels a mob of men crying for the blood of the man they have served. Adieu, Colonel."

Dun Duff drew back before the millionaire could respond and went to the door.

"Come!" he remarked to the person who awaited him there. "At Sam's, did you say? We will go straight to the place."

The dark-shirted man who walked beside Dun Duff while they crossed the space between the cabin and the saloon could not help admiring his coolness as indicated by his bearing and his step.

"You'd better turn back, Dun Duff," he said to himself. "The man who has sold himself to a woman who wants vengeance is beyond the door we're approaching. But I won't warn you; not for the world would I!"

The right hand of Dun Duff was conveniently near his belt as he strode into the saloon and council house of Satan City.

The whole camp seemed congregated there.

The lamp on the wall with the help of its bright tin reflector threw a vivid light over the room, and showed all the stalwart figures and bronzed faces that were there.

In a moment Dun found himself in the midst of the banded pards.

His look said, "I am here," and his bearing, cool and collected, showed that at the wall he was ready to throw another card.

If he had looked back when he had entered the place he would have seen that ten men had quietly placed themselves between him and the door.

"Captain Duff, the men of No Man's Ground have decided under the code that there must be no conflict of authority here," said a voice, and there stepped to the front the figure of Norgan, the young assayer.

The lips of the gold-plotter curled derisively.

"We have further decided that you are to quit the land without the customary notice," continued Norgan. "Your mission here is known; your former deeds in connection with Colonel Bluff's life have been made clear to-night by the gentleman behind me."

Dun Duff had already picked out the man mentioned, for in that crowd it was not difficult to find his trailer and late prisoner of the crypt, Captain Velvet, the detective.

It was no time for him to ask how the captive of the mine had obtained his liberty. It was enough that he was out, and that he had told

the men of No Man's Ground all he knew about the play for the bonanza stakes.

In an instant the eyes of the two men had met.

Norgan's hand went up before either could speak, and in an instant two men sprung from the door and alighted on Dun Duff's shoulders.

As he wheeled with an oath, he heard the voice of the chemist of the camp.

"We have to move unawares on a tiger, Dun Duff," said the young man. "We want no more unnecessary bloodshed in this game for gold and vengeance."

The two men who had been selected for their strength, held the desperado fast before the crowd, and in their grip he stood erect, flashing his eye over all, a veritable lion in chains.

"We sentence you to the cord exile," continued Norgan. "You have read the code, and you know its penalties. Gideon Goldbar says that Mona will be satisfied because her child is on the trail to her bosom. I will get the approval of Colonel Bluff."

Norgan left the court and hastened across the Square to Lolas's cabin.

The lamp was still burning on the table.

He opened the door and went in.

All at once he fell back with an exclamation on his lips.

On the floor at the side of the cot lay the body of a man, and Norgan catching up the lamp bent over it with a white face.

It was Colonel Bluff, with an expression of agony on his face, and with his useless legs drawn up to his chin.

Norgan held the lamp close and looked for a moment.

"Death came in his hour of triumph," muttered the young man. "The Crippled Croesus of California no longer holds the secret he forced from Mark Moline."

There was a paper in one of the clinched hands, and Norgan took it out.

Opening it, he went back to the light and read, while he held his breath:

"Vetla, Mona's companion, is Mad Monte's child. Give the girl her due, but don't beggar Mona and Opal."

With the paper in his grasp, Norgan went to the door and looked across the Plaza.

The portal of Shasta Sam's den was open wide, and as he looked a crowd surged out, and held before it was a Wild West Apollo, with his hands of silk tied on his back.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

AT THE END.

We go back to the place where we opened our romance.

We come down from the north and enter Sacramento, with its myriads of lights, for the day has ended, and night has again spread a pall of darkness over the city.

In a room where a dim light but poorly reveals its appointments, sits a woman. There is a shade over her eyes, as if even the small amount of light blinds them.

She leans back in the chair, which is on rockers, and her hands are clasped in her lap.

"Vetla, my child," she calls, and a door opens to admit a beautiful little girl, who runs across the room to her, and leans over her with that tenderness which belongs to childhood.

"Bring me the blade, Vetla," continues the occupant of the chair, and in a moment a something in paper is placed in her hands.

"I don't know what to make of it," she went on, turning to the girl. "Has my last sleuth followed the others? Am I never to feel the dagger put together, for I am not to see anything of the kind? Captain Velvet does not come. He swore to find the bilt—the hilt of the dagger which brought out the hidden secrets of Colonel Bluff's life and drove us apart. He said, too, that he would find the missing one, my child, Vetla. But he does not come. Where is my sleuth? And where is Colonel Bluff?"

"Why, the man who came here a few days ago and told me that he rode away tied to his saddle, went off himself before I could question him. He told you at the door that he was Nevada, did he, child?"

"He said that."

"I wish he would come and tell more, but he will not," sighed the woman, as her hands unwrapped the package, disclosing a dagger-blade broken at both ends.

"Listen! I hear some one!" exclaimed the girl. "Somebody is on the stair."

"Is it Captain Velvet?"

Vetla drew herself away from Mona and went to the door, where she listened a while.

All at once the door was pushed open, and the little girl drew back with a half-suppressed cry of fear, as a woman glided into the room like a pantheress.

There was something about the visitor that held Vetla spellbound in the middle of the room.

She wore a cloak over her shoulders, and her hair was confined somehow in a mannish bat.

As Vetla looked, a movement of the arms threw the cloak back, and the woman walked toward Mona, whose quick ears caught the footsteps, though they were like those of a cat.

"That is not you, Vetla," she said. "Who is in the room with us?"

"I am here!" was the answer, put in before the girl could think of a reply.

The tones more than the words appeared to produce an electric effect.

Mona hid the dagger in a second, and leaned forward as if with her poor eyes hardly able to distinguish night from day she could see the person who had spoken.

"You are here, are you?" she said. "I am in the dark and Vetla does not seem to know you. You must introduce yourself."

"Send the girl out first. Vetla, you call her, I believe."

The child had stolen closer to Mona, as if she thought that the strange woman had not come for any good, and when Colonel Bluff's cast-off wife told her to retire, she went away with a reluctance she could not conceal.

"Now, who are you?" asked Mona.

In another instant the stranger covered the distance between them with one stride, and then she was bending toward Mona, her eyes seemingly on fire.

"I am Inez!"

Mona shrunk away as if a serpent had hissed in her lap.

"Aha! you seem to know who Inez is?" was the quick continuance. "Well, he knew, too, before he died in the bonanza realm he created. I have come from the north—from the corpse of the man of two lives—the man who lured me to a false marriage, only to throw me off the moment you crossed his path."

"What have you done to him?"

"I killed him in Shasta Land!" was the hiss. "Boss Nevada, commissioned by Colonel Bluff to put me out of the way, never got to complete the job. He gave me a home among the mines he run for his master, but one night I disappeared and he thought I lay at the bottom of a shaft. For years he lived under this delusion, but he never told Colonel Bluff that he had not finished me himself. Time came when he knew the truth. When I met him in 'the office' and overthrew his reason by an assault which to-day is one of the mysteries of No Man's Ground, I began to play the game I had longed to play. By and by Colonel Bluff came to the net. I saw in him my enemy, and now yours. The dagger of the man now called Dun Duff let light in upon his double life, and you turned from him, but not to lose hopes of a reconciliation."

"It is not true," replied Mona. "I hoped for nothing of the kind. I have yearned for my child who was stolen when she was a babe almost. Colonel Bluff broke my heart when his double life was revealed, and that is why I never went to him while he occupied his chair on wheels. No! no! I don't want him. But if you know—tell me about my child."

"Don't ask me, woman. She is his child, too," cried Inez. "I have come down the mountain-trail alone to find you—to look into the face of the woman who crossed my path, and made me a creature with a stain. And what do you think goaded me on and on?"

Mona shook her head.

"I am here for vengeance! Hera I finish the game begun years and years ago. No Man's Ground has slipped through the dead hand of Colonel Bluff, and the men tigers up there can fight over the spoils. Your sleuth is yonder, too, but they are too many for him. The man who holds the missing dagger hilt is at the top of the heap. He is master of the bonanza realm."

Mona fell back with a blanched face, while Inez drew off and glared at her with the ferocity of a tigress about to throw herself upon her victim.

A moment thus, then she slipped forward again, this time with something white along her arm.

"You must be ready, Mona. You have been here a long time with plenty of time for preparation," she cried touching the hand of the almost blind woman who promptly withdrew it. "The child has developed into a beautiful woman."

"The child?—mine?" exclaimed Mona.

"Yours! I have watched her a thousand times, and more than once with a knife in my hands. But I have resolved to let her be for a life that is to her worse than death. She will become the wife of Dun Duff—the man who holds the lost hilt. Isn't that enough?"

And the hand of the speaker closed on her wrist.

Mona gave utterance to a cry.

"No! you can't get away!" was the response. "I am Inez; you seem to forget this again! You came between me and ambition. You kept me from being queen of No Man's Ground. Your witch face did it! Now my hand completes the play."

The door opened, and Inez dropped Mona's hand as she drew back.

Another woman had passed the threshold, and was now looking at her with heaving bosom and flushed face.

"God! is it you?" suddenly cried the Queen of Darkness. "You have followed me! You have been on my trail all the way—"

"Yes, viperess, I have spared nothing on the hunt!" and the new-comer came forward, her figure hampered by no cloak, her arms free and her hands evidently eager to close on her prey.

"Stand off!" shouted Inez, retreating, and showing the knife. "You are the spawn of the couple I hate!"

"I am Mona's child! You came here to kill, but you shall be thwarted again."

The knife went up and came down as Opal sprang at the woman, but the blow was warded off, and in a twinkling the agile waif of No Man's Ground was holding a struggling infuriated Amazon against the wall!

By and by a man summoned by Vetla rushed into the room and Opal surrendered her prisoner.

She turned toward the chair near the table and saw that its occupant had fallen forward and was sinking to the floor.

Rushing to the table, she caught Mona, and rasing the head kissed the brow above the almost sightless eyes.

"Mother! The new life has come."

There was a quick responsive cry, and a pair of arms were thrown round Opal's neck.

"My child! my child!"

Three days later there came to the house where the rescue occurred a man who was met by Mona at the door.

"She wants you," said the young girl, and he went up-stairs, two steps at a time, into Mona's presence.

Something dropped into the woman's lap. She picked it up and uttered a cry of pleasure.

"It is the missing hilt!" she exclaimed.

"Captain Velvet must be here!"

The man advanced and she pressed his hand.

"Where is he?" she asked.

"He is dead. The Code of No Man's Ground carried out the rope sentence; the man whose life has been a succession of cool plays against odds for one bonanza after another will plot no more. His will was found in his breast pocket after his death; it gives a million to Vetla, who is the child of Mark Moline, from whom he wrested the golden secret; the rest of his estate is yours, Mona; Norgan will be here to-morrow," he added, with a glance at Opal, who blushed. "The dagger has been pieced, and I am no longer your sleuth, Mona. Johny Jump-up has concluded to remain up there, and Norgan insists that I shall come back."

A few necessary words will complete our tale of No Man's Ground.

Boss Nevada never went back to the scene of his mastership. He disappeared after his call on Mona, and from that hour to the present he has not appeared among the mines which he developed for the Crippled Croesus of California.

The treasure in the crypt enriched Vetla, and made Opal one of the richest women of the Golden State when she became Norgan's bride.

Mona's sight has been restored by a delicate operation, and Vetla is growing into a dazzling woman.

Never did the Gold Goths come back to No Man's Ground, and it was disturbed no more by a cool-headed plotter like the desperate Duncan Duff.

Captain Velvet has retired from the trail of the broken dagger, and, strange to say, when he comes to Sacramento he is entertained by a handsome woman in the house once occupied by the Crippled Nabob of the Coast.

And rumor says that the hostess, who is Mona, is to become the wife of her guest.

As to the Queen of Darkness, she slipped through the fingers of the authorities, and one night some men found a runaway horse dragging a woman over a rocky trail.

"Hello!" cried one. "This person has the eyes of the Mexican who once enmeshed Colonel Bluff. I used to know her well, but I thought—"

"Don't!" cried the woman, pushing the bending face away. "Let me die in peace. The game is over, and it went against me. I am Inez!"

And almost with the announcement came a tremor, a few gasps, and all was still. The Queen had passed into darkness, indeed.

It came out that Norgan was not her son, as Duncan Duff had declared, but, for all that, it was his hands that made in the dark gold hills of California a grave for the dead Queen.

THE END.

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